LAUNCHing student creativity with John Spencer

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John's website: http://spencerauthor.com (includes FREE design thinking toolkit)
Click here to check out John's design thinking online course!

The goal for the student is we want them to be empowered critical thinkers and problem solvers, creators, makers.

The mindset that we want is that maker mindset. The process we want that leads to the maker mindset is design thinking. The framework is the LAUNCH cycle.

From who they are to the process to the framework.

Why is the "maker", "creator" idea in the classroom important?
● Student engagement is important, and engagement skyrockets when students are making stuff.
● Why school? We want to prepare them for the creative economy, for life. It's important on an economic level and a human level.

Sir Ken Robinson: Creativity is the process of having unique ideas that have value. Creativity is right up there with literacy as important skill. (From this TED Talk)

Creativity is more of a mindset, a way of doing things than a skill.

When John discovered design thinking …
● An eighth grade history project. Did research about integration of baseball. Launched to an audience at a history day competition. It was a little bit unnerving and a little bit hard. "I was ready to not send it to an audience." Recorded it at a radio studio. He heard his voice and hated it. He didn't want to share it. His teacher, Mrs. Smoot, said, "When you don't share your work with the world, you rob the world of your creativity. And I'm not going to let you do that." He wanted creativity to be at the top of the list as an eighth-grade teacher.
● As a teacher, he started out much more traditional. Was using creative, innovative ideas in the classroom but students weren't making anything. His projects "were recipes, not projects." Students were bored, turned off. He thought about the creative process, and he realized that he used design thinking no matter what creative effort he was engaged

in. Decided he would try it, and it worked! "It wasn't perfect. I made a lot of mistakes. I spent the next decade tweaking it." Before, he was either giving them a recipe for a project OR was giving them complete freedom (which led to failure or confusion or frustration or getting done way too fast). Structure was important, but structure needed to empower them.

The LAUNCH framework

Look, listen and learn -- Based on awareness. The starting point. Start with sense of empathy toward the audience/a problem to solve/a product to make/a scenario/a sense of wonder/curiosity.
Ask tons of questions -- process questions, product questions, questions to guide research.
Understand the process/problem -- Begin engaging in research. Get a sense of clarity. Build background knowledge. Build ideas. Allow to figure out what students are going to make. Still clarifying the problem that the product solves.
  ● "Even younger students can engage in research." In younger grades, teachers wonder if they should skip this step. Even if it isn't formal research, kids do research all the time … searching on the web, watching YouTube videos, ask friends, interviews, finding an interesting book, etc. Teachers always rail against YouTube and Wikipedia, but "they're where I go when I want to do research and find out how something works!"
Navigate ideas -- Brainstorming ([see sketchy video about the brainstorming process](#)).
Create -- Set deadlines, gather materials, etc. … then create a prototype. Prototype could be a physical product, digital product, service, event. They're all still products.
Highlight and fix (revise) -- highlight what works, fix what doesn't. Prepare to launch.
Launch -- send it to an authentic audience. There has to be an end audience. "It can't just be something that sits on their refrigerator at home."

FREE design thinking toolkit available at spencerauthor.com

John: "I never did a good job at creating an event around a launch." Some people have done amazing launches. Mike and Trevor from Michigan: documentary project, and they did a red carpet screening at a movie theater for war heroes featured in the documentary. "I would spend more time thinking about and planning for that launch."

Look, listen and learn … is this a messy part of the process? How can teachers navigate that?
A lot of times, it is messy. Can work it like an anticipatory set … pique their interest. What are you starting with? It's mentally/cognitively messy, but John didn't have a crazy loud class. Messy doesn't have to mean crazy. Some teachers thrive on that controlled chaos. When students were that engaged, even excitement looked a little more like a busy hum than a crazy chaos. It's messy more in the sense of creative struggle or navigating it and figuring it out. There's an excitement to the mess more than chaos.

<u>Create … In many classes, there isn't much creation. Why is that?</u>
People can feel rushed by their curriculum map. We can rush instead of reorganizing. There's a mindset of you learn it and you make it, not you learn it by making it. Creativity isn't what you do when you're finished learning.
Classroom management can be an issue too … it will feel different with design thinking.
An attitude of "let them do the project at home." Then parents end up making a great project. There are equity issues with that, too.
You don't have to make room for creativity. It isn't going to cause kids to fail the test.

Begin the process at school so that if kids want to continue it at home, they can.

<u>The launch … What's the importance of it? What's the detriment to skipping it?</u>
There can be a sense of "you're doing this for school." Your purpose is school. It's required. When there is a launch, it creates a positive peer pressure, a meaning and a purpose, a reason, a voice. "Don't rob the world of your creativity." When students launch their work to an audience, it feels more authentic and leads to harder work. Plus, it leads to a self concept of "I am a _____." When they paint a picture, they'll say "I did art" … but when they paint a mural with an audience, they'll say, "I'm an artist. I'm defining myself as an artist." It's important that their self-concept becomes that.

Example: A French class in an area with lots of people from Africa that speak French. They interviewed and found out that they needed tutorial videos for everyday U.S. life in French. The students felt self-conscious, but the refugees felt less self-conscious themselves because they felt the same way. It taught that French wasn't something for a grade but to communicate to people. "I can't imagine that project without an audience."

Example: A solar kitchen project. Students had to engage in a solar challenge … find as many devices that could be solar powered. (In a class when John taught all subjects in the same class.) They didn't begin with empathy … they were given a challenge. They asked tons of questions … researched through videos and made something small to test. They planned, brainstormed, etc. It took a couple weeks to create and revise (highlight and fix). In the end, our audience they launched to was not fancy … a group of teacher judges. It still mattered to them that it was judged. The "solar fair."

<u>What about the teacher who says "Two or three weeks … I don't have time to do that."?</u>
For the solar kitchen project … it linked to science standards (didn't deviate from curriculum map) … it used the scientific method. Every piece of LAUNCH cycle corresponds to Common Core ELA standards. The solar fair fit with presentation standards of reading. Also informational text, functional writing, etc. Didn't have to replace curriculum map with anything … chose a different way of organizing it rather than completely ignoring it. It's a deep dive into the topics instead of being superficial.

If you're nervous about this as a teacher, choose a time when people are wasting time anyway.
-- Before/after testing week, teachers can tend to show videos … try it then!
-- Right before winter break
"Nobody's going to give you a hard time when Mr. Johnson across the hall is showing 'Frosty the Snowman'!"