



# PAUL SOLARZ

## Student-led classrooms

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We naturally want to help kids learn ... be their providers and supporters, building background knowledge, etc. We deprive them the opportunity to fail when we do that too much.

We're just used to providing the most scaffolding we can, and that's good when we're providing content. What we don't always provide is the process/act of learning.

"The skills that kids learn while learning the content is much more transferrable and much more important in the long run."

"If I do a little less here, they'll gain a lot more in terms of life skills that they can transfer to other situations."

Student-led classes can be done anywhere (K-12). "You have to have the mindset of, 'content is important to me, but I don't want to try to make straight A students out of everybody. I want them to also experience the struggle of learning and the problem solving of figuring it out on my own.'"

We're so good at our job in certain ways that we over-prepare. .... Lessons can have ups and downs to them and we can let students help us find some solutions. We should figure it out as we go a little.

I have a tendency to over-prepare everything but under-deliver in the moment. It's always there and I can come back to it.

### **When did Paul see the need for more student-led instruction?**

Paul was raised in a more Montessori-style, exploration-based way. He broke stuff, he climbed on stuff. Parents let him do what he needed to do as a kid. He and his friends were with his friends all the time and they had to figure things out on their own sometimes.

Why don't we work together as a team, be a family and do this together? Here's the list of things we need to do in the classroom. What can you help me with?

"The kids can be doing nearly everything I'm doing. I'm going to plan out the lessons and the curriculum because that's my expertise. But I'm going to have the kids doing all the things like getting the computer cart out and taking care of the classroom and managing materials and collaborating with each other when they're confused."

Dealing with 25-28 kids in the computer lab and working through technical glitches. It felt like the whole time was spent putting out fires. "At some point, I wondered why I'm putting out every fire when the kids can be putting out fires for us. We can be getting them involved too."

It all started with the computer lab (student-led classroom). Students ask each other about glitches first. They come to me only as a last resort.

It feels like the classroom is like a big corporation and we're all like a marketing department or something. Everybody is in cubicles and we'll stand up and say, hey I need that report by 7:00, and we're all shouting to each other and we're all communicating with each other. There's a family feeling to it as well.

Don't ask for permission. If I don't like what I see, I'll give you feedback. Go with your gut.

### **It's more than troubleshooting tech issues and emptying the pencil sharpener ...**

Paul's class: he didn't realize his class looked much different from other classrooms ... didn't think it was that novel an approach.

I'm one of 24 people in the room. 23 of them have as much say as I do. (i.e. anyone can talk if they need to, etc.) My kids are doing things that teachers typically would be doing. I have no restrictions. If my students wanted to grade each other, they'd probably start trying. If Mr. Solarz can do it, we can do it.

They have assigned jobs (attendance, lunch count, checking in, morning announcements set-up, getting computer cart, moving desks around). They make all these calls.

They keep an eye on the clock so Paul doesn't have to. They might stop him to say it's time to transition to math, but he can say he needs three more minutes and override. (But Paul thanks them for helping to keep him on schedule.)

They're just doing a lot of the leadership things that a teacher would do.

### **What is "Give me five"?**

When he started teaching, he was reading a magazine that suggested to say “give me five” to get students’ attention. It was five because of five traits: eyes on me, ears on me, mouths closed, bodies facing me, listening to each other. He made a poster. “I use it to get the kids’ attention. Why shouldn’t I let the kids use it to get their attention as well? We should be working together on this. They have reasons to be in charge, too.” Students don’t use it in the middle of a lecture (he doesn’t lecture much) ... more when working collaboratively.

It just feels like what it’s supposed to be. We’re supposed to be this team with tasks to accomplish. We’re all working toward the same task.

Before, it was always about reading, skills, knowing exactly what each kid knew to a T. The more they collaborated, the less you knew what each student knew because it could have been about what their partner knew. It was this whole thing of merging, muddying the waters.

I’m tired of worrying so much about knowing exactly what each kid knows for every task. What I’d like to do is have multiple learning opportunities to learn the skill or concept. Sometimes those multiple options of working with others is going to trigger the learning. That’s a better step than if they got it wrong and I never got back to it.

At first, he’ll ask a student to do a “give me five” to get everyone ready for a transition. That trains students to get used to doing them on his/her own.

### **Isn’t it kind of chaotic?**

Teachers often don’t say it, but what we really want is control.

I don’t ever feel like there’s chaos. But when not everything is working in a regular classroom, the pressure falls on the teacher. At first, the teacher might blame the kids ... but if the teacher reflects, he/she realizes he/she could have done some things to prevent it.

I don’t have to be the super teacher all the time. I’m relying on 23 others to maintain order in the classroom. I can’t clone myself ... but yet my kids can redirect in a leadership, positive sort of way. We’re learning how to be leaders.

At first, they’ll say “Mr. Solarz told me to tell you to get on task.” Eventually, they leave the teacher off it and say “We need to get on task.”

To student: “If anyone is doing something distracting, do your best to be a good friend and help them get back on track.”

The first week or two it’s not all chaos, it’s very teacher-led because they’re still getting used to the student-led classroom.

Example: Looking at another student's computer screen isn't cheating in Paul's class. It may be they're looking to see if other kids are in the same place, or they may be working together.

### **I'd really like to do this. Where do I start?**

Why a student-led classroom might not work: because kids don't learn to respect each other. I need to build relationships with students, but they need to build relationships with each other too. I won't let them pick their partners ... they can sit anywhere, they can pick their passion project topic ... but I need every kid to work with every kid to build those relationships -- especially if they've had a bad relationship in the past.

### **Most important classroom meeting of the year: Marble theory. (Read this!)**

Paul says: I have a belief. It's a bit of a metaphor for how we are, intelligence-wise. I believe that all of us are born with the exact same number of marbles in our brain -- 1 billion (an arbitrary number). There are also thousands and thousands of Dixie cups. (He has marbles and Dixie cups as props.) Each marble represents your ability to do something. This cup, for example, represents my ability to pedal a bike ... another cup for getting off safely. When I'm born, those cups are pretty empty. For some people, they have natural ability and they're born with some marbles already in the cup. As soon as we start learning (mom and dad teaches us how to ride a bike or we practice ourselves), we add marbles from this vast supply into our "riding a bike" cup until it's pretty full. You're not going to just fall off your bike unless you hit a big crack or something. Because you practiced it, you might have more marbles in that cup than someone else. Does that make you more intelligent, or do you just have more skill in that area? The marbles are keys to what we call intelligence. In school, we've determined that the ones that put marbles in the reading/writing/math/spelling cups are "smart." But yet, someone who's really good at playing a cello or someone who can get other kids to do something or someone who can do a bicycle kick in soccer ... in school, we don't say that's intelligence, but you might be putting marbles in those cups. They might not cause someone to call you intelligent. In our classroom, let's think about what intelligence is. Why can't we be equally smart, but in different ways? (Our marbles are in different cups.) Those marbles can be distributed in academic cups or in sports or whatever. We all have the same amount. It's just about how you distribute them. In groups in the classroom, we need to ask, "How have my classmates distributed their marbles?" to determine their strengths.

After talking about marble theory, Paul will have highly gifted students asking students with learning disabilities for help because they realize that each child is talented in different areas.

"When you see that, you know that you've done something right for the classroom community."

It doesn't happen overnight -- and it doesn't always happen right.

### **The keys to starting the student-led classroom:**

- Do marble theory.

- Get them working collaboratively.
- Give them “give me five” power.
- Have them take risks and to make decisions without permission.
- Let them know they’ll get feedback (and that doesn’t mean we don’t want them to act independently if they get negative feedback).
- Thank them for taking risks.

### **What does Paul’s gradeless class look like, and how does it benefit a student-led classroom?**

You don’t have to be a gradeless classroom to be student-led.

When students get A’s on all their assignments, they’ll realize that they can do less and less and continue to get good grades. The kids who get grades lower than what they deserved are more likely to complain and give up.

Grades caused so much trauma, and for very silly reasons. When they got low grades, they didn’t try to learn what they didn’t know, and when they got high grades, they didn’t see how they could get better. That wasn’t what I wanted.

Every activity I do ... the grades don’t go to students. In his school, parents don’t see grades automatically. He grades more holistically, but not against standards based grading.

He’s been breaking down his report card for many years (math, reading, writing, social studies). He breaks an activity down into those categories and collects evidence over time. He’ll give a score for each breakdown. Each area (i.e. reading) has specific areas (i.e. comprehension, fluency, discussions, etc.). He’ll write 2-4 sentences for each describing what they’re like and how they can improve.

I believe in feedback. (Half of *Learn Like a PIRATE* focuses on feedback!) He responds with feedback all the time ... it just doesn’t all go in the gradebook. He’ll do individual feedback but also whole class feedback.

Because it’s a collaborative atmosphere, Paul will say it once and students will correct each other in the future. “We’re all extensions of Mr. Solarz in a way. We’re all teachers. We’re all learners.”

Are there surprises on the report card? Not too often. If they’re getting a lower grade, they’ve probably gotten those lower grades before. If someone is getting a D/F, he makes sure he’s been in contact with parents.

It prevents giving up and “I’m OK with not trying harder.”