## [What’s the Story? The Vermont Young People Social Action Team](https://whatsthestory.middcreate.net/vermont/)

Devoted to helping adolescent learners become more informed, empathic, and strategic change agents, and made possible by the Bread Loaf School of English.  
[www.whatsthestoryvt.com](https://whatsthestoryvt.us2.list-manage.com/track/click?u=cedc5b0ba6be972131b49cacd&id=e1da6d146a&e=ddf92456d3) – excerpts below – see highlighting for key ideas and resources

* What opportunities are opening around us for making learning more student centered?
* What resources/models do we know of that can help students regain & retain their agency?

***Duct Tape Teaching***

Despite the conclusive evidence that humans construct their own understanding of the world, educators continue to follow school’s unwritten rule, Teachers give learning to those capable of receiving it. Consequently, the older students get, the more time they spend sitting and listening to their teachers.

Adolescents are biologically impelled to pursue autonomy, purpose, mastery, and peer-to-peer connections, yet many schools--with large hearts and good intentions--over manage these learners, sometimes right down to the minute. Teacher-centered schooling erodes learners’ natural-born agency, cultivating a learned helplessness borne of being told what, when, how, and where to learn.

In her book *Duct Tape Parenting: A Less is More Approach to Raising Respectful, Responsible and Resilient Kids*, Vicki Hoefle makes a compelling case for resisting the urge to over manage our young peoples’ lives. One of my favorite chapters, *Being the Maid: Doing for Your Kids is the Problem*, reminds me of how educators--admirably eager to help their students succeed--do too much and then grow frustrated when students do too little.

There’s a dis-spiriting cycle at work here. Well-meaning educators exhaust themselves trying to pass along their learning, and students grow to depend on their generosity, rather than learning to rely on themselves and their network.

But no matter how hard teachers work, we can’t do the work of our learners’ learning. *Humans construct their own understanding of their world.* Or as cognitive scientist Chris Jernstedt states, “The one who is doing is the one who is learning.”

**Who Is Doing?**

I’ve spent a lot of time in schools, and my single largest impression is this: teachers are doing too much. Way too much. 175 or so days a year, teachers perform in front of a live audience, sometimes to 3 - 5 different groups of students and on different topics. That’s 525 - 875 gigs a year!

[](https://1.bp.blogspot.com/-ZaVDonLxrZc/YJ5jmOZfJXI/AAAAAAAAFFM/H-IGDc1w6xURV3NAqzbHF7bCdBeeKW-9QCNcBGAsYHQ/s356/Screen%2BShot%2B2021-05-14%2Bat%2B7.48.15%2BAM.png)

Teachers create the plans for each class. Teachers orchestrate the plans for each class. And then teachers evaluate how the day’s reality squared with their plans (hopefully), before heading right back to the drawing board to begin planning again. Add to this the tidal wave of reviewing and replying to what the students are and aren’t doing, and one can understand why so many committed educators burnout.

It shouldn’t surprise us that teachers own and do so much, while students, in comparison, own and do so little in our schools. Our teacher-centered operating system encourages teachers to take the driver’s seat of learning’s bus by requiring them to predetermine learning’s destination and arrival times. Students learn to get on board, take a seat, and wait for directions. The wild learner gets tamed.

Teaching will never be easy, but it could be a whole lot more satisfying for all involved, if schools partnered with students in ways that put them back in the driver’s seat. What would this look like? Check out [this table](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1bA_a-4L_VfEH2NduIRrLqR25AhRjv62BQB8rtrA8crc/edit?usp=sharing), which contrasts the features of our current operating system with the features of a brain-based operating system.

How might this disruptive era we’re experiencing be an opportunity to recalibrate who’s doing what and how much in our schools, in the name of student *and* educator agency and resiliency? This is precisely what we explore during *Creative Conversations*.

**Connecting, Sharing, Imagining**

To give you a feel for these *Creative Conversations*, here’s [a sampler of resources](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1SACftWk4tUMbVw7yP3IZ6XC_gWyejI6fg3UnPQ2Sts4/edit?usp=sharing) we’ve crowdsourced and collated into four sections.

1. Handy Materials for Teaching Right Now that Take No Prep
2. Assessment as a Conversation
3. Instruction & Curriculum
4. Models & Systems

And here are a few excerpts of what educators had to say during our most recent session.

“I have witnessed more students taking ownership of their learning because we (adults) had to let go of the intense structure of a school day during Covid closures.”

“I think we are developing a more global view of our 9-12 experience. And students are included in these conversations. During COVID the challenge has been to think in new and ‘out of the box’ ways to engage students--we should  keep thinking ahead-and ask what school can ‘become’ rather than just trying to ‘go back’ to what it was--so this is a good time for change!”

“I think we should reflect on the new ways we have provided education over the past year and shake things up.  Which students do better with on-line learning versus on-site?  We have an opportunity to redefine what education looks like and how students can be at the table in making those choices.”

“I would like to see graduation requirements reflect the attributes in a [Vermont Portrait of a Graduate](https://education.vermont.gov/documents/edu-pog): Learner Agency, Global Citizenship, Academic Proficiency, Well-Being, Critical thinking and Problem Solving, and Communication. Over the past year, I think we’ve seen that these abilities are essential for enabling students to succeed.”

“Other areas are a mental health/wellbeing student group, which presented today to the faculty, and having student members of our leadership team. More student voices in these meetings is becoming the norm.”

“I think there has been more and more communication required related to learning, assignments, feedback, etc. during remote and hybrid learning. It has opened up the conversation in our faculty and with students and families about feedback, how students know how they are doing, how much work is ‘the right’ amount, what students are working on and this coupled with the overarching concern about health and wellbeing it seems to naturally bring up the questions like: What learning matters most? How do we communicate about it? What is assessed and why? How did we design it? Did we design it with proficiencies in mind/with learners in mind? Does it make sense, etc. I think this sets us all up to desire more coherence and more meaningful learning opportunities.

“Student-teacher partnerships in which students co-teach classes with adults and co-plan and work in colleagueship with teachers fosters student agency and gives students the opportunity to construct their own learning.”

“I’m thinking about community-centered learning and how other organizations and supports are ready to push in and help. How do we create the connective tissue in between the systems?”

“I wonder if the facade is over. The students are watching and have watched for a long long time. Have we reached a tipping point where people will say we are not doing that crap anymore?”

**Creative Conversations**

These follow-up blogposts describe the session, share crowdsourced resources, and highlight some key takeaways. If you’re interested in exploring these, here they are.

* Learning Law #1: [Free Range Learning: More or Less Design?](https://billrichblog.blogspot.com/2020/12/free-range-learning-fly-be-free-mork-on.html)
* Learning Law #2: [Put Me In Coach: Get Them in the Game](https://billrichblog.blogspot.com/2021/02/put-me-in-coach-getting-students-into.html)
* Learning Law #3: [How & Why We Assess: Confronting Our Educational OS](https://billrichblog.blogspot.com/2021/03/why-and-how-we-assess-confronting-our.html)
* Learning Law #4: [Recovery or Relapse?](https://billrichblog.blogspot.com/2021/05/recovery-or-relapse.html)

If you have no bandwidth for any of this right now but would like to be kept in this loop, sign up for our [What’s the Story? Newsletter](https://mailchi.mp/dcddbc560af3/join-our-mailing-list), full of inspiration and practical resources for educators looking to get students’ in the driver’s seat of learning. 

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