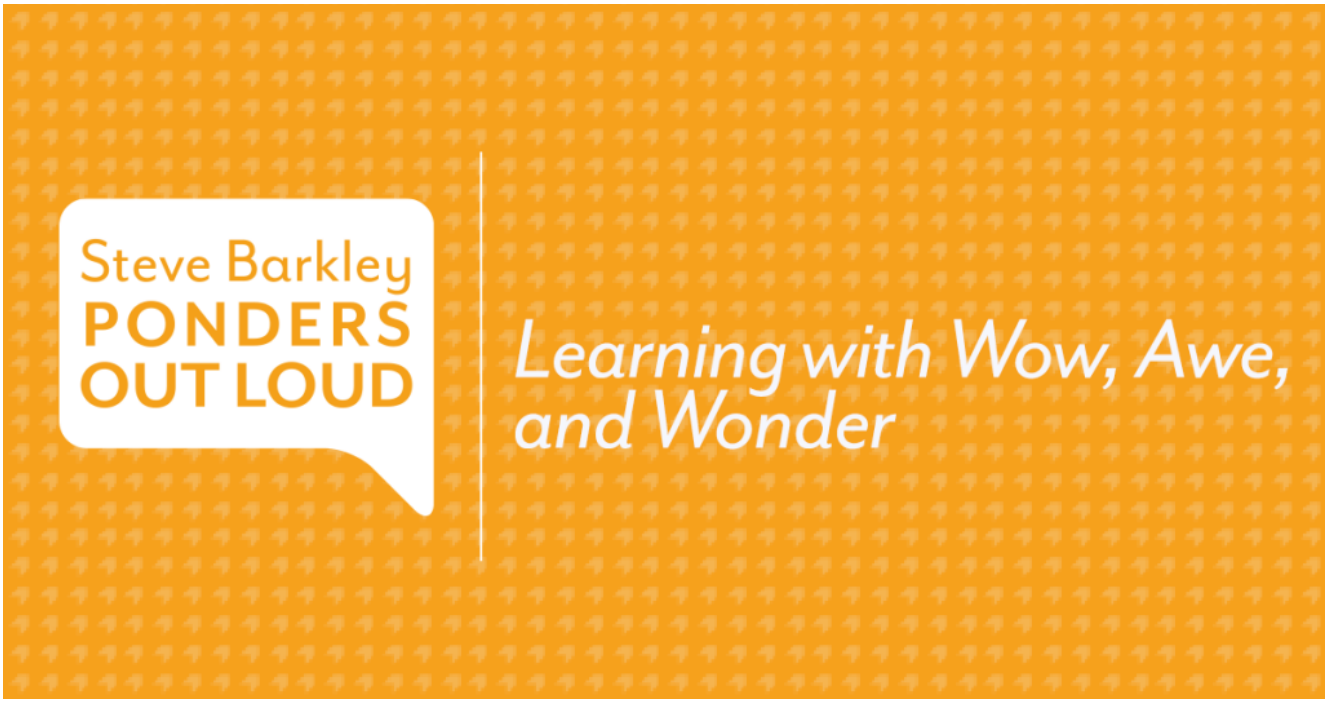
Podcast: Learning with Wow, Awe, and Wonder



Michael Hernandez, the author of, "**Storytelling With Purpose: Digital Projects to Ignite Student Curiosity**" and "**The Uncheatable Assessment Course**," shares insights on authentic learning. How can we create learning tasks and assessments that encourage and strengthen students' curiosity – supporting them in becoming engaged and inquisitive scholars and citizens.

Read Michael's article, When Assignments Invite Wonder here.

Find his book, "Storytelling With Purpose: Digital Projects to Ignite Student Curiosity" here.

Find the Uncheatable Assessments Course here.

Contact Michael: LinkedIn | Instagram | michael@storytelling-with-purpose.com

Subscribe to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast on

iTunes or visit BarkleyPD.com to find new episodes!

Podcast Transcript:

[00:00:00.340] – Steve [Intro]
Welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. As instructional coaches and school leaders, you are tasked with guiding continuous teacher growth to create student success. This podcast looks to support you with strategies from experienced guests, as well as my own insights that I've gathered over the years. I'm thrilled to have you with us. Thanks for tuning in.

[00:00:29.800] – Steve
Learning With Wow, Awe, and Wonder. Those who follow this podcast and my blogs know that the connections around experiencing wow, awe, and wonder leading to or leading from learning are areas that I return to frequently. Thus, when seeing a blog titled, "When Assignments Invite Wonder," I had to reach out to its author, Michael Hernandez, and invite him to join the podcast. Michael has been a teacher of journalism and film production where he embraced the work of helping young people find their voice to tell stories that make a difference. Today, he is an international speaker, author, and curriculum designer who helps individuals and organizations discover and share authentic stories that matter. Michael is the author of, "Storytelling with Purpose: Digital Projects to Ignite Student Curiosity" and is currently offering an online cohort course, "Uncheatable Assessments."

[00:01:39.720] – Steve
I really enjoyed our get acquainted call, and I'm looking forward to our conversation today. Welcome, Michael.

[00:01:48.200] – Michael
Hey, thanks for having me. It's great to be here.

[00:01:50.690] – Steve
You bet. So for starters, you've got an interesting

background, so how would you describe your earlier and later teaching experiences, impacting the work that you're doing today?

[00:02:06.280] – Michael
Yeah, well, I was a media arts teacher in high school at a public school in Los Angeles area for 26 years and so that's like my formal teacher experience, but I had been a TA in college before that and also very fortunate to have some really great teachers growing up. I grew up in Fresno, California, Central California. And as I became a teacher and worked with students, kind of tapped those experiences to sort of inspire me moving forward. And I think what was interesting – once I got into teaching, I mean, it's sort of in my blood, I guess, because both of my parents were teachers. My mom was an elementary teacher, my dad was a middle and high school teacher, so I couldn't escape it. But it was funny because I went to film school and I finished film school, and then I found a job teaching film and journalism. And I thought to myself, okay, this is great, this will be the 5-year plan, you know, I can pay off my student loan debt and work on my own projects and all the spare time the teachers have.

[00:03:13.940] – Michael
So that was the 5-year plan, and then it turned into the 26-year plan. I just sort of fell in love with it and had a great time. And so I remember when I started out teaching, of course those first couple years are really hard for everybody, and I found myself at this high-performing school, high socioeconomic status school where everyone's going to 4-year colleges. I really found myself trying to prove myself an elective course teacher – that I was worthy, that the course was quote-unquote "rigorous," that students and parents should sign up to take the class. And so there was a lot of, I'm not sure what the right word is for it, but just kind of trying to prove myself and show that the course and the curriculum and myself were worthy. And so I gave a lot of really hard

traditional assignments coming out of college. It was like textbooks and quizzes and a lot of written assignments and all of this stuff to prove it. And I didn't realize until later that it wasn't the written work and the quizzes that really mattered, it was the work that the students were doing in the real world.

[00:04:25.140] – Michael
And as my experience grew, as my learning from other teachers grew, and other teachers outside of my school, which was very important, I realized that a lot of teachers and students were struggling with why they should show up to school and why they should show up with integrity. So they were physically there, but not always intellectually or emotionally there. And this is long before COVID and long before screens.

[00:04:55.530] – Steve
Yeah.

[00:04:56.830] – Steve
Going through the motions is sort of what school has become. And so, so many times I'd be like in the copy room or in the faculty lounge or something and hearing these teachers like talking about the latest cheating scandal. You know, all these kids were suspended because they stole the answer key or whatever. And these teachers are stressed out over like, "Oh my God, these kids are so disrespectful. Why would they do this?: And I'm like, "why don't you guys just design an uncheatable assessment?" And they sort of stared at me blankly like, what are you talking about? And for me at that point, I had realized that the quizzes didn't matter, that what really mattered was can the students actually apply the knowledge that they learn in the class? Do they know what to do with it? And do they know how to make good ethical decisions with that information? And I never had a problem with cheating because my classes were project-based. And people have their stereotypes and preconceived ideas of what that means. We're going to get into that a little bit later, I think.

[00:05:57.290] – Michael
But essentially what this means is I don't do pretend. We don't do simulations. We have exercises where we learn how to do things and make mistakes, yes, but ultimately this is all gearing the students up for creating something real and tangible, what we call "authentic," something that matters to other people, that other people beyond the classroom will use or see or experience. And that just sort of elevates everything and it makes school worth coming to, worth doing. So I guess it's sort of, in a large nutshell, my teaching journey.

[00:06:37.330] – Steve
Yeah, you triggered two pieces for me that I want to explore with you. The first one is you said it was pre-COVID, and then you described – I think you used the term "was happening" with school. But I have to tell you, as I was listening to you Michael, I was in high school in the '60s and in college in the '70s, and it wasn't any different than what you just described.

[00:07:06.120] – Michael
Yeah.

[00:07:08.210] – Steve
I don't think I ever really thought that through deeply until I heard you put the description out there.

[00:07:15.740] – Michael
Yeah, and it's not to say that you shouldn't do traditional kinds of lessons and assignments.

[00:07:21.610] – Steve
Well, the word that caught me was it was compliance.

[00:07:26.860] – Michael
Compliance, right.

[00:07:28.510] – Steve

My authentic work I did in music and I did in sport, I did in leadership and social things, those pushed me authentic in ways that the classroom never did.

[00:07:45.920] – Michael
Right, yeah. And I think you can still have project-based assignments that are still compliance-based. So you're not really escaping it. So it's not just that the kids are making a project, it's that there's a lot of other dimensions to it and factors that are involved.

[00:08:00.320] – Steve
I think that takes me to the – I think that what you just said now takes me to the second point I was going to come up with. And I was going to ask you to play with the word rigor. Because if I heard correctly, what you thought you were doing in the early days, you used the term hard and lots was rigor, but it turned out that wasn't the rigor. Would you talk a little bit using that word rigor?

[00:08:24.850] – Michael
Yeah, I think that word is just another word for hard, and I think we've also conflated pain and suffering with good learning. Like, we think that good learning has to be painful just for the sake of it, or boring just for the sake of it, as opposed to something that is joyful and meaningful and experiences meaningful, joyful, and has a purpose is seen as frivolous or not academically rigorous. So I think that sort of comes from this generation of teachers and parents who grew up after No Child Left Behind, where the whole point of school was to take a test. There was no room, and there still is no room for exploration, for wonder, for experimentation, for creativity, for collaborating or for doing anything other than test prep, because that's what teachers are evaluated on. That's what schools are evaluated on and that metric drives everything. So to get to your question, what is rigor? I mean, to learn something, you always have to struggle. There will be pain and suffering, but I try to make the analogy of like, if

anybody has played a sport at a high level or plays a musical instrument, you know that there is pain and suffering that goes into both of those activities, right?

[00:09:44.890] – Michael
In sports, you could literally, like, break an arm or, you know, get physically injured in this journey to play a sport. But you're willing to go to the weight room and do cardio trainings and run drills that are repetitive and boring, honestly, right? But you do it because you're passionate. You do it because you know that there is a goal and a purpose to all of this hard work, which is to prepare you for that competition or that exhibition. If you're a musician, you practice for hours and hours and hours. You hurt your fingers. Maybe you sprain your wrist even. It's a lot of practice to get to that performance, but you do it because you love it. And that's what we're talking about here, is not to say that you get out of doing hard work or productive struggle. You absolutely have to. You can't learn without it. The point is to say let's just remove this test that has no purpose for anyone. There's no reason for it, and replace it with something that does have a purpose and a reason. That is probably harder. And so, in my work with journalism students, for example, that is probably, I would argue the hardest class you could ever take.

[00:10:58.720] – Michael
It's harder than AP Calculus. It's harder than chemistry. It's harder than AP Lit. And the reason is all of the other dimensions that you have that go into this. You're still doing research, you're still doing critical thinking, you still have to write very precisely and have command of language. But it's all these other legal and ethical dimensions and collaborating with other people and time management and all these things that relegated to "soft skills" that we're finding out now in the age of AI are actually the skills that will help us survive and help us stand out when the machines can do the

writing and the math for us. We don't need to memorize all of those things after all. What matters is discernment, good judgment, and ethical decision-making.

[00:11:49.400] – Steve
So as I was listening again, it struck me that it's hard work and pain and suffering to be an effective teacher.

[00:11:59.310] – Michael
Yeah, it is hard work.

[00:12:00.590] – Steve
Yeah. And it's that – you can't, you can't read the book and do it. Pretty similar to be a sport or a musician.

[00:12:11.930] – Michael
Well, absolutely. And that's what I argue in my book and my course, "Uncheatable Assessments" is that this idea that I have around students creating, in the case of the book, "digital stories," which I much prefer to call multimedia research projects, is a form of storytelling, and it's a form of teaching. And the research actually says that what we know as teachers, the best way to learn something is to teach it. And so what we're asking the students to do in these non-fiction stories – we're not making fantasy stories and doing poetry, as much as I love that – but what we're asking students to do is to synthesize all of these concepts and ideas for a lay audience, for someone who doesn't know what this is, and present it to them in a way that's clear and concise. And I think there's a quote from Einstein also who said that, "If you can't explain something clearly, you don't understand it." This is like the most, smartest mind ever saying this. And so I think we conflate again not just pain and suffering, but volume of work and minutes in a chair as learning, when those things don't actually directly relate to quality learning.

[00:13:24.350] – Steve

Years ago, I read about a high school, non-traditional, but their grading system was to earn an A, you had to teach it to someone else. And that really fits what you've said.

[00:13:43.090] – Steve
Now I know you understand it. If you could teach it to somebody else, that's the highest level of understanding it.

[00:13:49.920] – Steve
There was a quote in your article that caught my attention that I'd like you to expand on. "Across grade levels, I found that many students are out of practice when it comes to curiosity, especially asking strong generative questions in school." Expand on that a little bit?

[00:14:13.000] – Michael
Yeah, so, like I said, I taught high school for 26 years and I noticed a definite change over that time, especially in the last 10 years or so, where students were increasingly incapable of managing a project on their own, managing ambiguity, asking good questions. I mean, it's always tricky as a student to like, you know – the younger kids ask plenty of questions. When you get to high school, that's been sort of squashed or drained. And many people smarter than me have talked about that extensively. But I feel like the whole point of learning is about asking questions. It's about wonder. And so even, you know, when I teach journalism, this is a series of questions. And I actually make a parallel between journalism and the scientific method. I think they're actually the same. You observe the world and ask questions about it. I see this thing happening, this phenomenon, and I wonder about it, and I'm going to find out why it is what it is and what's causing it and what's impact and all those things. And so, journalists and scientists do the same thing.

[00:15:21.620] – Michael
I hypothesize, I've got this question and I'm going to research it, and I'm going to test it, and I'm going to

experiment, and then I'm going to report the synthesized results and the findings, right? And so, wonder is just another way of making maybe a more soulful type of question, like, I wonder why, or I wonder how. And I think the problem, because of standardized testing and also because of the volume of work teachers are asked to cover, the curriculum is so vast and, and unrealistic, we don't have time for questions. It's just like the fastest way is to deliver it quickly and to take a quick test or a quiz to check for memorization, and we don't make room for wonder. And then we wonder why students are showing up – or not to school, bored or not really putting in the effort because we haven't asked them to, we haven't invited them. And it's just an innate human trait that we're squashing. And so we're draining the humanity out of school. And that's really what this is about, is like, how can we bring humanity back into school?

[00:16:36.420] – Michael
And again, speaking of AI, that's what the founders of Anthropic and Google Education are saying in the age of AI, they need people who aren't coders, and they need people who are liberal arts majors, people who are philosophers, because that's going to be the future. And so that is about asking questions and about testing boundaries and questioning things. And that doesn't jive so well in our current political climate either. It's not just school, it's also all this outside pressure to not rock the apple cart or to offend someone by questioning status quo. And that gets a lot of people in trouble, even though it's well-intentioned and important for any kind of endeavor. If you're in business, like, I've got a question, the status quo, why is this? Is there a better way? And everybody needs to be okay with having their status quo questioned. If I can just add, I think everything comes back to psychology. Everything comes back to ego. Teachers, politicians, students, everyone, all of us. And so can we maybe sort of let go of that a little bit in, I guess, the endeavor of making ourselves better and making our, our

communities better?

[00:18:02.740] – Michael
And making our world better. And it's to say, it's not about me. It's like, if there's a better way, please let me know. And having that flexibility and openness and willingness to do that. And I tell my kids, it's like, in these project-based learning assignments, there's a lot of oral feedback. There's a public display and the students critique each other's work and, and we talk out loud about it. It's not trying to keep the learning a secret. Like, normally you'd give an assignment and you'd write your notes on the paper and give it back to the kid. And nobody sees that except that one student. But they probably don't even look because they're just looking for the grade. But everybody else can learn from it. And so how do you give and receive constructive feedback? And that's one of the foundational skills of being a member of society. And that's what we sort of, you know, try to foster here in these assignments. It's not, can you memorize my curriculum? Because again, let's just – sorry, I'm going on a rant here, but let's pull back for a minute and think about what is the purpose of school?

[00:19:00.070] – Michael
The whole point of school is to create productive citizens, period. Not test takers, not chemists, not poets. Maybe some of them, but you and I are not chemists or poets, and we're still functioning members of society. I want somebody who can ask good questions, be curious, pivot when it's time to pivot. How many times in the last 5 or 6 years have we had to pivot hard? As educators, as parents, and foster resiliency and mental agility. That's what this is about, and that's why I'm so passionate about what I'm doing.

[00:19:41.770] – Steve
You mentioned problem-based learning or project-based learning. I don't know, sometimes I flip both those back and forth. But you described a little broader definition of it

than may exist with some folks. So how you like to label project-based?

[00:20:00.700] – Michael
Yeah, I think a lot of people have preconceived ideas of what project-based learning is. Some people call it problem-based. I know a lot of folks call it challenge-based learning. There's maybe some other terms as well that are floating around out there. For me, I just kind of take like an umbrella sort of approach to it. The semantics don't really matter to me. What matters to me is, are students working on something? Their assignment is more than just worksheets and text-based assignments. It's creating something that could be a physical artifact, or it could be a performance or a system that they're designing, but something that is real and tangible. They're creating something. And I don't mean creating like painting, like an art project, and I don't mean you know, a poster just to hang on the classroom wall and then throw it away and put it in the trash either. But I think it's a multimodal experience, sometimes individually and sometimes collaboratively, to create something original in the world. And I think that's really important because that's how the world works. You and I as educators, we create something, we create curriculum, we create a syllabus, we create learning experiences that are intangible, but we're still creating something.

[00:21:23.360] – Michael
It's a system, it's a flow, it's a type of storytelling, actually. We ask scientists to create things, we ask writers to create things, books and articles and things like that. And so what we're doing is just sort of, you know, honing those skills and strengthening those skills to do that. And I think it just gives the work a purpose and a meaning. So much of school is purposeless, meaningless. The purpose of it is so that I can check the box to say that you've achieved whatever standard that the state has mandated that we cover. And I

think we can do all of those things. I think that's really important too, is like, you don't just throw away what you're already doing. This is like, yes, and I can do all of these things. And actually, the research says that project-based learning actually improves standardized test scores, right? So I know there's a lot of – like, in my high school, a lot of kids took AP classes. Well, project-based learning inside the AP class actually raises test scores as much as 10%age points.

[00:22:29.870] – Michael
So that's huge. And so this isn't just me just sort of ranting as the hippie guy in LA. It's just like, this is like scientifically proven. We've got tons of research on all of this stuff to back it up.

[00:22:44.260] – Steve
There's an old story shared with me that I just need to reinforce what you just said. Years ago, a teacher that I had met in Texas had a project that she did with her 4th graders every year where they studied this piece of property that abutted the school that was a nature preserve. And the big push came on test scores, and she got the student data and her students were way behind. And so she made a decision that she wasn't going to have the time this year to go do the projects that they normally did in that. And then she said one day into the fall when she and the kids just could not stand each other anymore, she sent them out there. And their task was to measure the silt in the bottom of the water that flowed through the creek. And when they came back and looked at the previous years, the silt had increased dramatically. And so it led to this whole pondering, which led to just unbelievable investigations, government hiking property, uncovering things, and at the end of the year, she ended up posting the greatest increase in test scores of anybody across her school.

[00:24:11.690] – Steve
So it really lived the point that you said. Kids struggled through reading a piece of material because they needed the

knowledge from it to apply to what they were doing.

[00:24:23.220] – Michael
100%. Yeah. And that's what I say in my course, "Uncheatable Assessments," like the 3 qualities of an uncheatable assessment is originality, right? The learning artifact has to be one of a kind. It can't be the same as everybody else's. Personal connection. So there's a way for students to somehow either have agency over this or see for themselves the impact, and then purpose. So they're doing something that matters beyond just performative test-taking or quiz-taking. And you're absolutely right, and the research backs that up too.

[00:24:58.360] – Steve
Yeah. Michael, a lot of the listeners to this podcast are instructional coaches or teacher leaders, administrators at the school level. I'm wondering what thoughts you have about what's the support that those folks should be looking to provide to teachers who are maybe just first putting their foot into being more along a project-based learning route or teachers who are taking a bigger step?

[00:25:30.090] – Michael
Yeah, I mean, that's a big complicated question because I know administrators are also under pressure from parents and from policymakers to do those test scores or do things a certain way. And when you deviate or introduce something new, there's resistance from your faculty as well as from parents who are like, what is this? You know, because they're afraid or they don't think it's just another initiative that I'm gonna have to just go through and get through because then there's gonna be another one next year and it doesn't really matter. So I would say, first of all, acknowledge that, and say we're not dispensing with anything else and we're going to introduce and try something that is going to solve the problems that we're facing right now, which is all the things we've been talking about: students' attendance, engagement levels, passion. We're going to lower discipline issues because kids will want to

show up and find that there's a reason to be there. So many times, I can't tell you how many times, like, kids will tell me, "Oh, I'm sick today, but I showed up to come to your class," right?

[00:26:31.560] – Michael
Or students who moved to my school district just to take my course. And so make a reason why kids should show up. Now, logistically on the ground, what does that mean? First of all, make it okay for teachers to experiment, to make mistakes, and not be clean and pretty and concise. You cannot measure all of the things that happen in a project-based learning situation. Right? So don't try to like get the stopwatch out and like, "Well, I saw so many kids on task and so many not on task," or "Why are all the kids talking? They should be quiet. "You know, all of these things that you hear all the time, those are about compliance. It's not about learning. And remember that real learning is messy. It is individualized. Every student works at their own pace and has different skills and traits. And that's the thing that we're honoring is that humanity. Remember that. Standardized test is not human. It is inhuman. It is saying that everybody is the same when in fact we are not. And every learner learns in different ways and has different strengths and weaknesses.

[00:27:40.860] – Michael
And so make it okay for kids to be on different activities at the same time. They have different rates of completion. It's okay to constructively have a "noisy room" where students are collaborating and talking and exploring and Saying wow out loud. That's gonna look different for juniors in high school than it would for third graders, for sure. But make it okay and give them time and space to do that. I think that's the biggest piece is the space. A lot of folks do need sort of a refreshing of their memories of what this means and what this looks like. So you can't just say, go make a project. Because they won't know what to do with that. Because they're outta

practice, or some of them have maybe never experienced a really high-quality project-based learning experience that is highly structured. This isn't a free-for-all. It takes a lot of work and thinking to have it work. So can you find examples of that? Can you find resources to help folks ramp up to that? And it's another reason I published my book is it's sort of a manual and guide for teachers about how to do these kinds of projects and integrate them into everyday classroom.

[00:28:56.460] – Michael
Starting with something very, very small and simple and easy that only takes a few minutes. You can just start with something super small, like having students ask questions. Just start with that, which is the foundation for the bigger projects later. Then you can start to introduce a sort of very familiar variation on something that you already do. Like in the book, we talk about things like an explainer video, which is essentially just a recorded class presentation. So if you already ask students to make a slide deck and do a presentation, just do the same thing you're doing, just have them record it, and then we can listen back to it. So, kind of ramp people up to that. Don't make it such a huge out of the unusual, out of the norm kind of thing, but just sort of like, how can I introduce things that are going to be that work for them? And also, like we do with the students, is give them a choice about what's right for them. For their classroom, for their students, for their department. Because what's right for the math teachers might not be right for the social studies teachers.

[00:29:59.390] – Michael
And so I think that's really important. Now, what does this cost? That's what you're asking. Cost in like consultant fees, programs that you're buying, PD days, which everything is like scarce right now. So, you know, again, there are easy ways that you can do it affordably, like, book studies are a great way to do it. I have resources for that for my book too. Like,

here’s like a bunch of questions you can ask around the book and get things started. And then decide how much resources you have to do this. Do you do a cohort model and have lead teachers sort of introduce it to their department or to grade level expertise or something like that? And I think that’s the thing, but I think the biggest challenge, whenever you’re doing any kind of PD is mindset. Like, are we open to this and do we understand why we’re doing this? And make it about those teachers’ classrooms and the challenges they’re facing right now. How is this actually going to work? So, yeah, I think that’s the biggest nut to crack.

[00:31:06.920] – Steve
I’m hearing that project-based teaching is project-based learning on the teacher’s part.

[00:31:12.760] – Michael
Yeah. Well, I mean, it is, right? We already do that.

[00:31:15.130] – Steve
The same criteria that you said that the – you named 3 criteria earlier that you need to keep in mind, or that tell you – it sounds to me the teacher’s got to be going through the same 3.

[00:31:27.060] – Steve
What were those 3 again?

[00:31:29.940] – Michael
Originality, personal connection, and purpose.

[00:31:32.830] – Steve
Yeah. So if I’m a coach, that’d be pretty critical that I keep that in mind as I look at the teacher, while the teacher’s keeping that in mind for the students.

[00:31:42.620] – Michael
Yeah. I mean, we have all these conversations around differentiation, Tier 1 instruction, you know, multimodal

learning. That's what this is about. You can't do all of that with an essay. You can't do all of that with a standardized test. It doesn't work. And it's mandated by law that you have to make your assignments accessible. And this solves all of those problems. It checks a lot of boxes. We just have to get out of that mindset that quote unquote rigor means, you know, a 5-page essay or you know, a 100-question multiple choice test. That is not rigor.

[00:32:19.750] – Steve
Michael, I was looking forward to this, and I'm excited that you came and you shared this. Talk to listeners a little bit about how they can follow up with you, kind of learn more about your book, more about the course.

[00:32:32.870] – Michael
Yeah, you can find me on socials. I'm on LinkedIn quite a bit, posting content there. My website michaelhernandez.net. And also I speak at a variety of different conferences. I speak at Learning Forward Conference, ISTE, and ASCD. You can find me there. Subscribe to my newsletter. I publish ideas and resources monthly at Changing the Narrative. And yeah, definitely stay in touch. Email me, DM me on LinkedIn. Love to support what you and your team are doing at your school.

[00:33:06.990] – Steve
Well, I will put the link to the article that caused me to reach out to you in the podcast notes, and I'll put your website in there as well so people can find that just in case they're listening while they're out for a walk and didn't get it.

[00:33:25.870] – Michael
Yeah, and you can find my book,"Storytelling with Purpose" anywhere you buy books. So it's on Amazon, Barnes Noble, Bookshop, all the places.

[00:33:33.930] – Steve

Terrific. Well, thanks again.

[00:33:36.190] – Michael
Thank you.

[00:33:38.390] – Steve [Outro]
Thanks for listening, folks. I'd love to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter or LinkedIn at Steve Barkley. Or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.