Podcast: Encouraging Teachers to Teach More by Micro-Managing Less

Miriam Plotinsky, the author of "*Teach More Hover Less: How to Stop Micromanaging Your Secondary Classroom,*" identifies that students need to be empowered to take ownership of their learning in order to be fully engaged. She breaks hover-free teaching down into four sequential stages: mindset, deeper relationships, planning for engagement, and choice-based instruction.

Read "*Teach More Hover Less*" here.

Read "Lead Like a Teacher" here.

Find Miriam's articles here.

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PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Steve [Intro]: 00:01 Hello, and welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud Podcast. Instructional coaches and leaders create the environment that supports teachers to continually imagine, grow and achieve. They model an excitement for learning that teachers in turn model for students. This podcast is dedicated to promoting the important aspects of instructional leadership. Thanks for listening. I'm thrilled you're here.

Steve: 00:34 Encouraging teachers to teach more by micromanaging less. Miriam Plotinsky, instructional specialist and the author of, "Teach More, Hover Less: How to Stop Micromanaging Your Secondary Classroom," is our guest today. Welcome Miriam.

Miriam: 00:51 Hi. So happy to be here. Thanks for having me.

Steve: 00:54 Thank you. I'm wondering if you'd start by giving folks a little description of your role of instructional specialists.

Miriam: 01:03 Absolutely. I work in a very large school district. It's the 14th largest in the country, I believe, Montgomery County, Maryland. It's outside Washington DC metro area. So it's an urban, suburban school district. It's more urban than suburban in a lot of ways. Very, very interesting area to be in. A lot going on. A lot of kids. About 166,000 kids to serve. So I am specifically, at this point in my career, I'm doing curriculum and instruction for secondary language arts and literacy. So I work specifically with reading, writing, english leaders and teachers and students all over my district in grades 6-12.

Steve: 01:46 So I'm really interested in the term, "micromanaging." So I'm wondering if you can describe for me – I'm an administrator, I'm a coach, I'm observing in a classroom, what might I see watching the kids or what might I see watching the teacher that would suggest micromanaging

might be happening?

Miriam: 02:10 What you'll probably see is a teacher who is working way too hard. So the teacher is talking a lot. Typically, they might be moving around a lot, which is not necessarily something that we don't wanna have happen, but they're going from student to student. I call it playing human whack-a-mole. You go over to one kid, you try to get them to be on task, then you go to another kid, that first kid, you lose them. That's what it could look like. It's not student discourse you're observing, it's student conversation. Sometimes, the classroom might be very quiet in a micromanaged classroom because people think that's good. It's not often the best thing in the world. If you do hear student conversation, it's off task in a micromanaged classroom because kids are not really feeling the same responsibility or engagement for what they're learning that they would be feeling in a more student-centered environment. So those are just some of the signs.

Steve: 03:08 I caught you switching on two words there that I wanna check back on. It seems like you identified student conversation versus student discussion. Were those the two words?

Miriam: 03:19 Discourse, I believe.

Steve: 03:20 Discourse. That's what I meant. Yeah. Talk about that a little bit.

Miriam: 03:25 Student to student discourse is a specific term that really involves how students are engaging in verbal output about the class content. So it's when they are focused, when they are interested and involved in the learning. That's discourse. Student to student or student to teacher, it can go either way. Conversation is just, "hey, what's up?" And we hear a lot of that. If I'm in a classroom and students are working on a vocabulary, you know, they have 15 words they have to look up and do something with. And if you walk around

the classroom, very often students are talking about what happened in the Super Bowl on Sunday night because there was a lot to talk about. Or maybe they're having some relationship drama or whatever's happening in their lives. That's not discourse. Discourse would be, which one of these words are we supposed to focus on the most? Are we supposed to focus on words we don't know, or words we do know? And then they're having a conversation about the task. That's more of a discourse opportunity.

Steve: 04:22 It's interesting because I was wondering if student questions were part of the discourse and kind of the first example you used, you
went to the student raising the question.

Miriam: 04:34 To me, student questioning is so powerful because what it is – it's first of all it's cognitive output. They're thinking about something and they're revealing their thinking to us. But the other thing about questions is that they require language production. When students are producing language about academic content, they're benefiting. And questioning means that they are in a safe space where asking about what they're supposed to be learning has been taught to be an acceptable and desirable – let's hope, thing to do. So that inductive reasoning that we'd like kids to be able to do comes out of questioning.

Steve: 05:08 So what are some of he factors that you think lead teachers to get caught up in micromanaging?

Miriam: 05:17 The biggest one, I believe is probably fear. We are living in a time, especially now, where student behavior has become increasingly
unpredictable. And we are coming out of something, a gigantic global trauma that we're unsure of the long term effects of. Short term is that we are wanting students to be compliant. So if we're not sure how they're gonna respond to something, it's a lot easier if we just keep a lot of control or what feels

like control over a situation. And if I hand any piece of that to students, if I give them any of that trust, what happens if it goes off the rails? Well, my question is always, okay, so what happens? But I think think it's just this very deep seated fear of what might go on. And it's also habit driven. We're very habit oriented people. We have gotten used to doing something a certain way and over time I think we do it more as opposed to less. So if I haven't taught that I have to teach specific content bell to bell and I can't deviate from that plan over the years, I'm gonna get more rigid, not less rigid.

Steve: 06:21 Yeah. I was kind of thinking time and amount of content. So fear of running out of time.

Miriam: 06:29 There's also that. The fear that you're not going to cover what you're supposed to cover. And you know, in my content area, which is English language arts, we talk a lot about depth over pace because a lot of the skills are recursive. I do understand there's a little bit of a push pull and realistically, teachers have curriculum needs they need to make sure they address. But teaching for coverage as opposed to teaching for learning isn't the way to go either. So we have to work on a balance. That's what makes teaching so complex. One of the many things that makes teaching so complex.

Steve: 07:00 Yeah, I like to use a phrase that we need to trust the brains of kids. That they may end up learning things that we didn't teach if we take the route of creating the opportunities, which is is part of what I'm hearing you describe.

Miriam: 07:15 Well, absolutely. And students will make meaning of whatever it is we do or don't do. We think that if we just exert that micromanagement, that students will learn what we're teaching. But the journey from my brain into yours, I don't really know how anything lands. And when we ask students to tell us what they've learned, we're afraid to hear the

answers because the answers we get are not what we're expecting. So no matter what my intentions are, kids are gonna do something else with what I've created.

Steve: 07:46 In your book, you share four sequential stages for teachers to to move to – hovering less and maximize learning time. I'm wondering if I just put each one of them out there one at a time, if you'd fill us in with some info about it. So you described that mindset's important as a starter,

Miriam: 08:09 Mindset is the one thing that is so difficult to change. I remember when I used to hire teachers and the first thing I would look for was belief systems because I knew that of everything, I could work on skill. Working on will is a little different. So we have to believe that the students in front of us can take on more than we've given them. And if we don't believe that, what the this first part of the book does is it gives some tools for doing that. You know, some tools for recognizing your own micromanaging behaviors, maybe identifying a couple to pull out and stop doing. Because the journey to becoming what I call a hover-free teacher isn't about this gigantic seismic shift that occurs over the course of a few days or a few months. It's about slowly identifying things you do and making small changes. And that that includes with your belief system. So it's first, recognizing where there might be some contradiction between your beliefs and your actions and then picking something to fix it with.

Steve: 09:12 And the next thing you address is relationships.

Miriam: 09:15 hen we talk about relationships, most people mean personal rapport and I'm talking about something very different, which is students understanding that no matter what ideas they put forth, given that their intentions are good, we are going to validate – right or wrong, we're gonna celebrate mistakes. We're going to give them a space to express their thinking and to make them feel significant as learners, not

just as people. Because it's great if I formed a relationship with you because we both like soccer, but you might not speak out in my class because I haven't taken it that one step further. So I call that academic identity and book I just finished writing it's coming out in November, is all about this in much greater detail. How we create that sense of validation in kids.

Steve: 10:01 It's interesting – I hadn't put the two words together before, but as I was listening to you, I'm almost thinking there's a learning relationship.

Miriam: 10:11 Yes, it is a learning relationship, which is important for students to understand that because they really hinge on my teacher likes me and it's good for them to think that because they'll be much more willing to learn with you if they believe that you like them. But there's also, my teacher respects my thoughts, my teacher respects my opinion, and if I speak up on this class and volunteer an idea, I'm not gonna get shot down. Or even the implication of, I say something and the teacher goes, "okay…" and moves on. That is an unspoken message of whatever I just said wasn't what they were looking for. So little tiny things can damage that relationship.

Steve: 10:50 Then you talk about planning for engagement.

Miriam: 10:53 Yeah. And that's really how we bring students into the lesson planning process. And that's not in terms of them with content where the teachers were the experts on what we're trying to teach, but taking student proclivities and inclinations into consideration. "What worked for you the last unit we taught?" "Well, we did a lot of small group work and I'm not comfortable with small group work." Or, "I don't like it when you cold call me." We learn a little bit more about that and then we use it. So every time I teach a class, I ask people, what works for your learning? What got in the way of your learning – lingering questions? And if my students tell me this was a big Zoom era one – too many breakout sessions.

Next class, I'm gonna cut them way down and tell them that I'm doing that so they know that they have a voice in how this class is not just
operating but is being planned and then they're more engaged.

Steve: 11:44 I like it. And lastly, you talked about choice-based instruction.

Miriam: 11:50 When people see choice, they get really worried because they think, oh my gosh, I've gotta give students choices all the time. That must be so hard. And my approach is much more balanced. It's where we can, when we can, give students some options. So that might be one day a week, it might be two days a week. If we're working on a series of things that we've got a project going on, or maybe we have some reading assignments and everyone's gotta be in the same place by Friday but just as I know that I start my day, I always start my day writing that's just better fit for my brain. So kids have the same leanings that adults do. Why don't we give them one or two days a week when they can pick what they're working on. That has to happen. Everyone is going to, again, wind up where they wind up. But that also gives the teacher a little bit more freedom to figure out where everyone is and to work with that. And it's not about a tool, not about a choice board or a learning menu or a hyper doc. Those are great. It's more about just the approach of where can I give my kids some options.

Steve: 12:47 As I'm listening to you, I'm really hearing that respect theme run through it all.

Miriam: 12:54 I mean, we have to. We have to respect our kids and I remember, this is more to more of a traditional model, adults demanding
respect. And we do deserve it but it's a two-way street and every time we forget that, I think the the cost is both to kids learning and to our classroom community as a whole.

Steve: 13:15 What are some directions, actions that you think people in the role of instructional coaches and school-based administrators can take to support teachers in looking at less hovering?

Miriam: 13:29 When we go into schools to provide support, schools often wanna do this too. There's this giant laundry list of desired actions. Here's everything we have to do. And it's really the role of the specialist or the coach not to be the person who tells everyone how to do it all the time because it's not our school, it's not our building, not our culture. So a lot of what we do is we work in a listening space and then we provide some direction. We try to look at puzzle pieces that are sort of all over the place and fit them together in a way that somebody with a more entrenched perspective might not be able to. But what I always say is less is more find the big through line. Figure out one thing, the biggest thing that you can do to meet the goals that you'd like to meet.

Miriam: 14:13 What is urgent? And then as a coach, figure out steps that will get them there that are practical and doable. Because we like to say things to teachers like, "oh, it won't be more work." It will be . It'll absolutely be more work. We must tell the truth, but if we start with more than one thing, we're really gonna lose people. And also the other thing with whatever one thing we pick, get some teacher voices at that table. Because a lot of times when you walk into a conference room, there are no teachers there. We're talking about school improvement and some students at some point should be at that table too. So make sure you're talking to the right people. Because if you bring people an initiative, I've been thinking a lot about professional development versus professional learning, professional development is done to people. Professional learning is what teachers would like to access to grow. So we wanna make sure we're doing more with people and not to people, which is a big part of what my second book is

about. How do we bring that teacher perspective into how we improve schools.

Steve: 15:14 So is that the book, “Lead Like a Teacher?”

Miriam: 15:17 That is. That’s “Lead Like a Teacher.”

Steve: 15:20 Tell folks a little bit about what they’d what they’d find there.

Miriam: 15:23 This is really for school leaders who are having experience with what I call the “empathy gap.” Once you’re out, you’re out. When you leave a classroom, people don’t like hearing this, you’re no longer a classroom teacher and your empathy begins to recede because whatever experiences you had in the classroom are quickly becoming obsolete. So what the book does, it moves from what I call a micro to a macro. So classroom-based things like coaching, observation, feedback, how do you bring teachers into that? It’s all about bringing the teacher perspective and making sure we partner with teachers more than we’re doing. So observation isn’t necessarily, I’m coming into your room and scripting everything that has a purpose, but it’s also, I might be planning a lesson with you and co-teaching it. I might be having a much more instructional role. So it’s about steeping our leadership in instruction. And the macro chapters are about listening skills and communication and how we can improve some of those bigger picture items because we have the forest and we have the trees, and school leaders are often the forest and teachers are often the trees and we’ve gotta bring them together.

Steve: 16:28 Well that sounds great. How about telling folks the best way that they can follow up with you, find your books. You do a lot of writing and I’d like folks to be able to find that and then connect and send any questions your way.

Miriam: 16:44 Awesome. Well, I have a website. It’s my first name and my last name mashed together, so it’s

miriamplotinsky.com and that has a lot of information about my books. I put conference workshops, resources, professional development, all that is on the website. I'm also very reachable – Twitter is my social media of choice @mirplo, that's a great way to get in touch with me. But there's also a contact form on my website, which goes straight into my email and I'm very responsive. I'd love getting into conversations. My books are available everywhere books are sold, including, Barnes and Noble, Amazon, and yeah, a lot of articles. I write a lot for Edutopia, Educational Week sometimes. So Google's really helpful if you wanna find me. One of my friends told me, I I should probably not get arrested because it's too easy to find me.

Steve: 17:33 . Well, I appreciate it and we'll put several of those those links in the lead-in to the podcast. Thanks so much.

Miriam: 17:40 Sounds Great. Thank you so much. Pleasure.

Steve [Outro]: 17:49 Thank you for listening. You can subscribe to Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud on iTunes and Podbean. And please remember to
rate and review us on iTunes. I also want to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter @stevebarkley or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.