Podcast: Teaching Strategies

In this week's episode of the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast, Steve is joined by high school teacher and PLS Classes instructor, Jim Brinling to discuss teaching strategies and methods to increase teaching options.

View Jim's explanation of the Success Equation here.

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PODCAST TRANSCRIPTAnnouncer: 00:00 Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud is brought to you by PLS Classes. Online and on-site graduate classes and professional development opportunities delivered by master facilitators from eight accredited college partners. Visit plsclasses.com for more.

Steve [Intro]: 00:16 Hello and welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. For over three decades, I've had the opportunity to learn with educators at all levels, both

nationally and internationally. I invite you to listen as I explore my thoughts and learning on a variety of topics connected to teaching, learning and leading with some of the best and brightest educators from around the globe. Thanks for listening in.

Steve : 00:43 Teaching strategies, building options. Very often in my presentations on peer coaching and I'm listing through the benefits that people get from engaging in peer coaching and being in their colleagues' classrooms, I described that one of those benefits is increasingly options that you have available to you as a teacher. And I'll make the statement that great teachers are great because they know what to do, great teachers are great because they always have something else to try. And as a teacher builds that repertoire, it increases their opportunity to be effective with more and more students. Another way that I describe it at times is that if you look at a person's natural style of teaching, their natural style of classroom management, there's a group of students that are a perfect match to you as a teacher and those students find it easier and comfortable to work with you. And as a teacher, every time that I can add new additional options to my repertoire, it gives me the chance to increase my reach to an ever-growing, larger a group of students. In today's podcast, I'd like to explore this concept of increasing teaching options with Jim Brinling who is a high school, social studies teacher from Pennsylvania and is also an instructor in courses for teachers that help teachers develop those strategies. So Jim, thanks for joining us today.

Jim: 02:33 Thank you very much for the opportunity, Steve.

Steve : 02:35 Jim, would you take a moment and kind of introduce yourself to our podcast listeners here? A little bit about your teaching background?

Jim: 02:44 Yeah, absolutely. I'm in my 22nd year of teaching at Fairview high school, which is a suburban school just west

of Erie, Pennsylvania. And for the first 10 years of my career I taught sixth grade in our middle school and about 12 years ago I moved up here to the high school. Now I teach mostly juniors and seniors. I teach a variety of social studies courses ranging from current events in law to economics, sociology, and I teach psychology at the AP level.

Steve : 03:17 Jim, I used that term in the opening here about a teacher's natural style of teaching, natural style of classroom management and leadership. How would you describe what you'd say is your natural style?

Jim: 03:36 Oh, wow. So, it's funny, I noticed the same thing. There are some students who really connect with how I do things and the way I like to design and organize, not only are our classroom environment for learning, but also a daily lesson or perhaps an approach to different topics and ideas. Some students naturally take to it, other students I've got to work a little bit harder to reach them in order to get them hooked in as I like to say or to find personal meaning in the content. I describe my individual style more along the lines of as a presenter of ideas and laying things out for students in a way that they're able to learn the material and learn the key concepts but also engage with it on a personal level.

Jim: 04:24 It's really easy – I like to say a benefit as a social studies teacher, teaching content that tends to be very personal to students when they begin talking about psychology and how behavior works from the inside out, that's naturally engaging for students. Moving then into sociology, I begin to talk about, well, what are those social forces outside of the self that then influence how you behave beyond perhaps your perceptible or conscious, you know, awareness. And that again, is naturally engaging for students. And then the other areas that I teach, you know, economics and government as well as current events in law just become very relevant for students as a citizen. You know, no matter what career choice they tend to make, whether it's engineering or whatever career choice, a

technical school, whatever it might be, you know, they're all already part of our society and soon will be voting citizens in our society and already part of our economy. So it's important for them to become functional citizens as well. So my style is to make it as relevant and personal to them as possible because of course, making meaning for them is the goal for kids trying to find their place in the world.

Steve : 05:37 So Jim, you've studied several different content areas of teaching strategies. I'm wondering if you could identify for us, one or two of those areas that you've studied that you've discovered something to add to your teaching repertoire so that when you aren't connecting with a student or a student isn't getting it on your first instructional attempt, it's one of those strategies you've reached to and I guess the word I would use as conscious. It's where you've consciously added that to your instructional plan.

Jim: 06:19 Yeah, sure. So one of the things I like to think about is who I am as an educator. What are my – what's my comfort zone. And learning about me and the approach that I take, not only as a learner, also as a teacher and facilitator in the classroom – how that influences the outcomes within my classroom courses. But then understanding and acknowledging that there are diverse populations of students within my class who may have a different temperament style. Maybe they have a different perceptual organizational style. Perhaps – I know you had a podcast earlier about multiple intelligences. Perhaps I can tap into their multiple intelligences so, you know, one of the strategies that, you know, I think is good for any teacher to engage in is be aware of our own kind of a comfort zone and then being aware of breaking out of that comfort zone in order to reach the diverse kinds of populations that we have in class.

Jim: 07:23 And that's really where I start. And then from there, it's okay, how best can I reach whatever it is I'm trying to target. Whether it's a different temperament style,

maybe I’m doing something more on ideas and big concepts and that hits the intuitive intuitive thinker, or perhaps, I engage something more along the lines of like, empathy or trying to understand another person’s perspective and that’s the, you know, sensing perceiver, so it just gets into – for the different kinds of learners that we have in class, perhaps engaging in stepping out of my comfort zone in order to get there.
Steve : 08:06 How about from a – tapping into student motivation as a key to learning. Are there some conscious areas that you look at in uncovering the best way to motivate a student?

Jim: 08:22 Yeah, sure. You know, you had a blog post I really enjoyed on August 26th, about teaching and coaching student effort and as somebody who works with kids not only in the classroom, but out of the classroom, extracurricular activities, I’ve always enjoyed the success equation. And I liked your modification. You added, you know, ability through effort plus strategy divided by manageable task, equal success. And I like to teach my students overtly that particular equation and also them into like understanding what’s the difference between a fixed mindset or a growth mindset that Carol Dweck had described. But also like to extend that even further and my students and I often bring in Angela Duckworth and her work on grit and Anders Ericsson’s work with deliberate practice in order to try and help them understand like, okay, engaging with something needs to be something that they also need to bring to the table and stick to-itiveness.

Jim: 09:21 So we’ve modified that question just a little bit. I’ll tell you that we have put a kind of parentheses around the whole equation and put an exponent on it, which is grit. So that is something that I actively engage with my students so that they can, you know, understand where motivation comes from. And, you know, I talk about the different pieces of that

equation as well. For instance, ability is something that they're born with and the effort is something that they have a choice in. Although, I can certainly encourage and get that effort going. But, you know, that's part of the portion that they bring to the table. My portion of that equation is, you know, can I can identify the strategy. Now that strategy may be something that we do as a whole class or maybe I do individually with students and of course manageable task. We get into, you know, the Vygotsky, the zone of proximal development and it's up to us in a conversation to try and push them a little bit further out of their comfort zone in order to, you know, get – to increase their skills and increase their abilities. So the success equation is one that I really like.

Steve : 10:35 So give me the equation the way that you're working with it.

Jim: 10:39 Yeah. So, ability through effort plus strategy is the numerator and the denominator is the manageable task, like you have described, and then put kind of parentheses or brackets around the whole thing. I'm not a math teacher, but my exponent for the entire equation then is grit. And that's passion and perseverance.

Steve : 11:00 That's great. As I'm listening to you, Jim, I'm wondering how much of your strategies with students, be it motivational or instructional, are you making, I guess transparent might be the word – actually transparent to the student, that the student is aware of what you're doing versus you're just implementing it for the student and the student's being successful in learning, but not necessarily being aware of what it is you've done as a teacher.

Jim: 11:29 Yeah, I think so. My answer that would be, it depends on how overt I want to be with it. Oftentimes, you know what's fun about teaching PLS courses is that there's a lot of transfer over into my psychology classes and my

sociology classes. And so some things I will overtly say, you know, this is a strategy that includes sensory styles and we'll go through those sensory styles and we'll do an interest inventory, very similar to the one that you do in the course and help kids understand. Although, I will say this, our elementary school here at Fairview, in middle school, really engages kids in this kind of understanding. So most kids come into my classroom with an understanding of their KTAV inventory. But then extending that into like something similar to the Gregorick style delineator, which gets into perceptual and organizational styles, where I began to then talk to kids about their sequential nature as opposed to their global nature or concrete as opposed to abstract.

Jim: 12:36 And this tends to be illuminating to the kids. And I'll be very overt with it, that, you know, our goal here is to help you learn how you learn and how you organize and understand things. And for a lot of kids, this is an a-ha moment. You know, this is one of those times where they say "oh, this explains so much about myself." And really that's fun as not only a teacher, but somebody who works with kids all the time. You know, then there are other times when perhaps a strategy I'll use will be a bit more discreet. And you know, I don't necessarily want to reveal exactly why I'm doing something, but just pull something in, in a way that I know is appropriate to respond and perhaps it's, you know, just something quick and something easy. And this often happens perhaps, when dealing with classroom management issues. You know, so for instance, responding to some kind of behavior.

Jim: 13:37 There's a red light, green light, a yellow light or really, you know, green, yellow and red light progression that you get to in terms of identifying whether a behavior is appropriate or not appropriate. And then understanding how to respond appropriately to that and having a list of strategies. Whether these be nonverbal strategies, whether it be like a

look or a hand signal or gesture. Perhaps it's a verbal intervention. It could be me using proximity, it could be me using or providing a student choice or redirecting a student or perhaps, you know, in serious issues where I've got to sit a student down, I'll use that helping hand strategy, which is kind of a win-win process of five steps where you sit a student down and you say, you know, "when you do this behavior, you know, I feel, or this affects me in this way" and then lead them through a process of strategies where it's not confrontational but it's one where I've expressed what I need, I've made it clear to the student what they need to do to, you know, meet my expectations and also cooperate in class. So I don't sit down with a student and say "we're going to do the five – the helping hand strategy right now", but it's something that is kind of in that back repertoire that I can pull up if needed. So, you know, it really kinda depends. Some are overt some are covert. That's the best way I can explain it.

Steve : 15:08 I'm thinking of, you know, the fact that you're working with students soon to be headed off to higher ed, they have that opportunity to know strategies that they can use to build their own learning plans based on what they uncovered working with you.

Jim: 15:32 Yeah. So that does become a process of self discovery and really through my, again, psychology and sociology courses, you know, we confront some, at times, some very serious issues. Some of them deeply personal – personal with family. I say up front, I'm not a psychologist and I'm not a trained psychologist, however, students do often open up, you know, with difficulties they may be having that I then share appropriately with, you know, the people involved. But they are trying – they're kids and they're trying to figure out their way in the world. And it's empowering to them to understand themselves as well as, gives them confidence to know that they can then go into whatever life has in store for

them beyond the graduation, that they had to take a little bit of understanding of themselves and how other people work as they go.

Jim: 16:29 You know, it is funny Steve. I often tell my seniors, you know, it's not very often that you have an appointment for a major life change. You know, when you think about marriage and kids and your first big job, those things happen at irregular times and it can be somewhat unpredictable. Graduating from high school is one of those things that, it's set in stone. Our kids know January 6th, they're going to walk out of here and life will not be the same June 7th. Yeah, excuse me, June 6th and June 7th.

Steve : 17:08 Yeah. A lot of the people who listen to this podcast, Jim, work as coaches to teachers, instructional coaches or administrators coaching teachers. I'm wondering if you've got some thoughts for people in that coaching role as to the best ways to assist teachers in expanding their teaching options and teaching strategies.

Jim: 17:34 I will say I'm very complimentary of our administration here. Particularly, you know, our superintendent, our assistant superintendent and our building level principals. They give me a lot of freedom to explore areas of curriculum as well as the techniques to do so. They give me the ability to not – what some people might describe as being bogged down in paperwork – minute details that don't add to the instruction or the assessment of students. And so, I'm able to really focus on, you know, what I'm trying to accomplish in a lesson and I have the freedom to figure out what that might be in the best way as well as the support to get those things accomplished. I'll give you an example. So I'm the kind of teacher like – I mean I know what I'm going to be teaching next week, I know what I'm going to be teaching the week after that.

Jim: 18:33 How I accomplish that year to year may change based

on the students that I have and you know, their interests and so forth. So I'll often come into class on like, a Monday and say to my administrator, "hey, next week or this Friday I'd really like to do this." And they go out of their way to help me make sure that that gets accomplished. So this past fall, for instance, I was teaching economics and kind of had an idea and we'd been reworking the curriculum around civics and so we decided to – I just had an idea, why don't we do an open market during our tutorial period, where students would – I assign students to be in teams and from those teams, those students then designed whatever product they were going to do.

Jim: 19:19 They had to keep track of all of their input costs as well as, you know, their labor hours in order to do this. And then they created, like, for a lot of kids it was like brownies or cookies or you know, some other kinds of product. Coffee, that sort of stuff. And so we had kind of an open air market in our zoo. And with the support that I had from my administration, we were able to get that accomplished really within a matter of days. So they're very open to supporting me in that way and engaging in creating space for myself and other teachers in my department to work cooperatively. So I teach economics and it's part of an economics and a government course. And I had made a suggestion along with a fellow teacher of mine a couple of years back – my background is in economics and the fellow teacher that I was working with, his background was more in the political science area and to allow us to each teach side by side courses and then halfway through the course, flip the student population that we had and then keep several running themes going through his course and my course and then do a culminating project at the end of the semester, bringing both group of students together to work cooperatively.

Steve: 20:41 Powerful.

Jim: 20:41 Yeah. That's what we're doing right now.

Steve: 20:45 Sounds like you're encouraged to take risk and learn yourself, which has the learning impact on the students.

Jim: 20:56 Very much so. Yeah.

Jim: 20:58 Very much so. It allows for some really cool things to happen. And it allows myself and the professionals that I work with to be – to pursue, you know, whatever we feel is best for our instruction and our students.

Steve: 21:13 Terrific. Terrific. Well, it's been great to have this time with Jim. I really appreciate it.

Jim: 21:17 Thank you so much.

Steve: 21:18 You Bet. You Bet. Take care.

Jim: 21:20 Thank you. You do the same.

Steve: 21:21 Yep, bye-bye.

Steve [Outro]: 21:24 Thanks again 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.