Podcast for Teachers: Personalizing Distance Learning With Mentoring

In this podcast, Steve is joined by music teacher & mentor, Jon Schwartz to explore the impact of personalizing learning.

Read Jon's article, "Mentoring Can Bring a Personal Touch to Distance Learning."

Visit Jon's website here.

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Steve [Intro]: 00:00 Hello and welcome to the teacher edition of the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. For over three decades, I've had the opportunity to learn with teachers in and out of their classroom settings. I have a great respect for the complexity of teaching and I know that all great teachers are continuous learners. I invite you to join me as I explore my thoughts and insights on a variety of topics, connected to teaching and learning. Thanks for listening.

Steve: 00:33 "Personalizing Distance Learning With Mentoring." That was the title of an online article that caught my mind. It's suggested that mentoring can bring a personal touch to distance learning and that we can increase exploring the

impact of personalization on learning. I've been focused on that area for awhile. The article was written by Jon Schwartz, a music teacher who was mentoring a second grade English language learner. I was able to contact Jon and invited him to share his experiences with us on this podcast. So welcome Jon.

Jon: 01:14 Wow. Thank you so much for having me.

Steve: 01:17 So Jon, It was a delight to find your rocking teacher website. You had a lot of things there to share about your teaching. So would you give us just a little bit of of your background and your basic approach in teaching and learning?

Jon: 01:33 Okay. Well starting with education, I started teaching in a place called East Palo Alto in the Bay area, which is a place that has an underserved community. And then I came down here to Southern California and I've always liked teaching in those areas where there was a lot of English language learners. You know, my wife of 23 years is from Mexico. So she's from a town and we're allowed to the people from around here are from, it's kind of like a small town, a small rural town where actually she had to ride a a donkey to school 90 minutes each way.

Steve: 02:09 Wow.

Jon: 02:09 So anyway, so that's always the type of community I've always enjoyed and I've come up with some methods over the years that have been really fun in the classroom, but really engaging for the students. So, you know, basically for me, I've always been a general education teacher. And it's only been in the last several years that I've started to solely teach music.

Jon: 02:35 About 2014, I started using music to teach kids academics. So we would use Chuck Berry songs learn everything from phonics to figurative language. We had this thing called the "kids like blues band." We had English language learners

who previously couldn’t speak any English going up there and speaking or singing songs like the Promised Land, which are like the Royal Road to Americana. And they’re also, you know, in terms of like reading complexity pretty high up there. So that was really fun. Then what I did is I went out and I got my masters in special ed and I went back into the classroom and started teaching music. So I’ve kind of been all over the place, but what I’ve learned, basically, is that kids really love it when you take a part of yourself that you like and that you let them run with it, if it’s fun for them. And music is one of the best ways to do that because it’s participatory, it allows students with special needs and English language learners grasp the words and the curriculum and everybody wins for it.

Steve: 03:47 So describe a little bit about the mentoring program that your district implemented.

Jon: 03:51 Okay. The mentoring program. So I’m a music teacher, right? And so, when when the schools were locked down, I was wondering if I was going to keep my job. I was still receiving a paycheck, but I’m thinking, well, how long is this going to last? And I got an email from the district and they said, in addition to submitting your music lessons online, you’re going to be a mentor in this mentoring program. And I thought, I didn’t sign on for that. I’m the music teacher. So the instructions were to go onto a Zoom with the rest of the enrichment teacher staff and we were going to talk about basically deputizing a lot of the ancillary staff into helping students that needed more academic and social-emotional support.

Steve: 04:44 I noticed in the article that you wrote, you mentioned that they provided some training for you stepping into that role.

Jon: 04:54 Right.

Steve: 04:55 What kinds of things did they do?

Jon: 04:57 Well, not all of the ancillary staff that became mentors were familiar with the Zoom technology. So they did things like teach everybody how to use Zoom and they also taught everybody how to use the LMS or the learning management systems that the children were using. So all of the mentors had to be able to, you know, log onto the internet, go to Zoom, access the learning management system, or basically the digital curriculum and share the screen with the students so both of them were looking at the same thing. And as long as you could do that, you were good to go. You know, obviously they did a lot of you know, safety trainings and we were also involved in contacting the students families and getting them on board. So first there was a letter from the district introducing the program and then second, there was a letter from us stating I'm going to be your child's mentor. And then we arranged a time which was mutually convenient and it was 90 minutes per day for four days a week.

Steve: 06:10 I was just delighted as I read about the personalization that you did with your student Vanessa and my sense of how you got to know her. Talk about that a little bit?

Jon: 06:27 Right. Well, Vanessa is like the sweetest child in the world, and it was such a pleasure to work with her. Now, keep in mind, I was in lockdown too and my world had gotten pretty dark and bleak. Because I'm sitting there with my 14 year old, who was – it was difficult for her too. And the thing is, is that she was doing distance learning, but it wasn't fun. So that kind of prodded me to make – you know, ordinarily I'm a fun teacher, but then I just decided to let it all hang out with Vanessa and really make it super fun. So we would access the curriculum and I'm kind of a fun guy. What I do, is when there were opportunities to take little sojourns into a related material, I do that. And I just speak in a way that was, you know, that I'd speak to anybody.

Jon: 07:22 So she was doing things like, if she was trying to count turtles and make an array of you know, four down and three across, we'd talk about that, I'd give her a little lesson that all the while sharing the screen and then I would go, "turtles are pretty cool, but you know what eats them?" She goes, "what?" And I go "tiger sharks!" I happen to be an underwater photographer and I've always been interested in tiger sharks. And in fact, tiger sharks go into the Harbor in Honokohau Harbor in Kona all the time. So I'm really familiar with them because sometimes they chase the turtles up onto the ramp. So I know a ton about tiger sharks. And when I started bringing that up, Vanessa was like, "that's not true." Really? No we're sharing a screen here so I can research stuff.

Jon: 08:14 I can show her images and videos and everything on the internet. So within one minute, not only is she convinced about the tiger shark things, but we've seen everything that I could show if I was sitting down next to one adult. So that's something really to grab onto. It's, you know, we started out with the turtles thing, the array. Four across three down. How many is that? Well, it's four groups of three. And next thing you know, we're talking about tiger sharks and she's seen all the nat-geo things. So the cool thing was is that her attention span was incredible. So, you know, normally students in second grade get really antsy after about 15 minutes. They start tapping their feet. In fact I do right. So I've got to make it fun. She and I would be working for over 45 minutes or sometimes much more without taking a bathroom break and just going on and on and on and her attention span was awesome. So again, you know, I've been teaching for 20 years and I know the attention span that's common with second graders. You know, usually they need to go from subject, then you take a little break and then you do another subject for 20 minutes here and there. With Vanessa, we would just get lost in these conversations that were, you know, they were, they were academic conversations, but we would be able to go into fun stuff because we basically it's like, I'm sitting next to her.

Steve: 09:40 Yeah. That shared screen. Powerful.

Jon: 09:44 Yeah. So it's like, I'm sitting next to her, but I'm really good at using the internet and Google and and YouTube and all that stuff to not only just show them the material, but to show them how to find the material.

Steve: 09:59 Yeah. So you were teaching social-emotional English language learning along with whatever content you had. Plus the technology
research, learning how to learn skills.

Jon: 10:13 Yeah. And not just that – search engine optimization and how, you know, how Google works because you could type in tigers, right? And what do you do? You get a picture, not even of a tiger, but you get a link to the tigers baseball team. Well, why is that right? So the kids are learning stuff, and this is all super fascinating to kids who – the original material, was what count the turtles. And now we're talking about tiger sharks and search engine optimization and all this cool stuff from national geographic, watching videos. So it was super fun. And her attention span increased to the point where I couldn't believe it. I've never seen any of this from a second grader. And it probably also had to do a lot with the fact that she was at her home and her preferred environment.

Steve: 11:08 It's probably an extra step of personalized.

Jon: 11:10 Oh yeah. Her brother would be photo bombing with a Batman mask on.

Steve: 11:20 [laughter] So I was delighted when I read the article, the piece that you shared about your daughter recognizing a change in you as this process kind of brought you to life in the midst of the quarantine. I can tell from your website, you've always been a a high active, engaged and involved teacher. I'm wondering what this experience of the mentor piece, what did it reinforce that you'd say, you know

about teaching learning and is there anything you see influencing decisions you'd you'd be making moving ahead in your teaching because of this experience?

Jon: 12:05 Right. Well, distance learning doesn't have to be boring and you can make an emotional connection with a student, as long as you're permitted by the district and the people that train you to do something that you like doing and to share yourself with the students. So it was interesting because my daughter goes to a private school. So I try to keep her on task on her desktop and the stuff that she was getting was really dry. It was just like Wikipedia stuff. And then I would go upstairs and I would log on with Vanessa. And again, we'd be talking about super interesting stuff and they encouraged us, which was a really good call, the district encouraged us to share some of our own lives and that prompted the student to share theirs. So I was surprised how quickly an emotional bond grew between me and my mentee.

Steve: 13:03 I think there's some really important points here because when we went online this spring, you know, all of a sudden overnight people were working online with students that they had previously built a relationship with back in the classroom. This fall has quite a few teachers around the world who are starting the year with their students in a remote setting. And so having to build those relationships through a distance format is something that needs to be done. And as I listened to you today, and the pieces that I read in the article, I sense that Vanessa learned as much about you as you learned about her.

Jon: 13:53 Yeah, it was amazing. Well, I do things like if we had to make a list of verbs or anything like that, I'd take my laptop and I'd chase my puppy. Or, you know, in the background, I'd listen to her mom making Mexican food and my wife happens to be Mexican. So I'd you know, I strike up a conversation with her about pozole, right? Or enchiladas.

Steve: 14:15 It’s really connecting for me because I spent this spring teaching educators around the world about coaching in a personalized one-on-one setting for the first time, because the conference that they were supposed to be attending, where I was going to do a four day training was was canceled. And when I got to the end of it, I’m pretty sure that they learned more than than had we all been together for that that four day conference. And it occurred because of their opportunity to personalize the learning. And that’s really what kept going through my head as I read your your experience and as I listened to you today.

Jon: 15:06 Yeah, I took every opportunity to make it fun for the students. So I would just, you know, if I was talking to a teacher who was new to this, I would say, Hey, start out with something that was cool in your day, and that wasn’t cool. You know, something that you enjoyed or something that’s annoying you, right? Because everybody can relate to that.

Steve: 15:26 So it really reinforces how this social-emotional piece is critical for a a consciousness on our part. Would you take a moment and mention your, your website and I’ll be sure to stick it in the intro to this podcast so people will be able to take a look at it and I’ll also stick in the link to the article.

Jon: 15:57 Oh, thank you so much. The website is www.rockingteacher.com.

Steve: 16:04 Okay. Thanks a lot. Have a great day.

Jon: 16:07 Okay. Thank you so much.

Steve: 16:08 Bye bye.

Jon: 16:09 Bye.

Steve [Outro]: 16:12 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.