

Marshall Memo 795

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
July 15, 2019

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Quotes of the Week

“In free societies, the ability to think critically is viewed as a cornerstone of individual civic engagement and economic success. We may disagree about which content students should learn, but we at least agree that, whatever they end up learning, students ought to think critically about it.”

Daniel Willingham (see item #1)

“We interpret new information in light of what we already know. The right preparation makes new learning easier.”

(*ibid.*)

“The great enemy of communication, we find, is the illusion of it.”

William Whyte (quoted in item #3)

“Accountability is one of the hardest competencies for teams to fully master because it takes time and follow-through to keep individuals on the hook.”

Allison Rodman and Jill Thompson (*ibid.*)

“I suggest to PLCs that for each time they review and analyze student work, they should review and analyze teacher work twice. I have found a 2:1 ratio to be a healthy balance between looking at teacher work and looking at student work.”

Daniel Venables in “So, How Are We Going to Teach This?” in *Educational Leadership*, Summer 2019 (Vol. 76, #9, pp. 36-41), <https://bit.ly/2Y6VGoS>;

Venables can be reached at dvenables@authenticplcs.com.

“Education is not always entertainment.”

Hasan Kwame Jeffries (see item #5)

1. Daniel Willingham on Teaching Critical Thinking

In this *Future Frontiers* Occasional Paper, Daniel Willingham (University of Virginia) says there is no disagreement about the importance of teaching critical thinking skills. “In free societies,” he says, “the ability to think critically is viewed as a cornerstone of individual civic engagement and economic success. We may disagree about which content students should learn, but we at least agree that, whatever they end up learning, students ought to think critically about it.”

But what exactly *is* critical thinking? It’s what people need when they play chess, plan strategy for a field hockey game, or design a product, says Willingham. Each situation is fluid and challenging, and there aren’t any routine, reusable solutions – hence the need to deploy critical thinking. He offers a “commonsensical” definition of what it looks like for an individual student:

- The thinking is original in the moment, not carried over from a previous situation.
- The thinking is self-directed, not following instructions from another person.
- The thinking respects conventions that make it more likely to yield useful conclusions – for example, *Consider both sides of an issue* and *Offer evidence of claims made*.

Willingham notes that another aspect of critical thinking is choosing to think that way when others might not – for example, noticing a way to get a better bargain in a store when most people would just pick up an item and pay. But the main focus of this paper is *successful* critical thinking. “Of course we want students to choose to think,” says Willingham, “but we won’t be satisfied if their thinking is illogical, scattered, and ultimately fails.”

Can critical thinking be taught? Willingham believes it’s not something people just pick up; explicit instruction can improve skill in this area. The question is whether students can *transfer* critical thinking skills to new situations. For example, if students are taught how to evaluate the arguments in a series of newspaper editorials, will they be able to apply what they learn to a different medium of persuasion; or if they learn Latin or computer programming, will they think logically in other contexts? Research findings on this are “decidedly mixed,” he says.

What about explicitly teaching critical thinking skills in schools – for example, giving students five hours on this subject a week, as some schools are doing? Willingham reports that follow-up studies show very little gain, and there isn’t good research on whether the skills transfer to other situations. While we wait for better studies, he believes there’s a problem we can see right now: the unrealistic expectation that teaching students to “analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information will improve use of those skills across the board.” This leads

Willingham to his major conclusion: critical thinking looks different in each subject area, and we should teach it within each subject without expecting that students' gains will necessarily transfer.

"But wait," he says. "Surely there are some principles of thinking that apply across fields of study." For example:

- "A" and "not A" cannot both be true, whether in mathematics or history.
- Strawperson arguments are always weak.
- Having a conflict of interest makes your case suspect.
- Looking at many instances gives you a more accurate picture of what's going on than looking at only one or two.

True, says Willingham. "The problem is that people who learn these broadly applicable principles in one situation often fail to apply them in a new situation." There's a "surprising failure to deploy useful knowledge." For example, people may have been taught the fourth insight on the list above (looking at lots of instances improves accuracy) but still jump to a conclusion about a person's friendliness based on a single action. One study found that students needed to be told explicitly about the link between two different situations to transfer a skill to a new scenario.

Looking more closely at the failure of transfer, Willingham found that the similarities between disparate situations are at the "deep structure" level, but people tend to look at the surface characteristics. Yes, we understand the principle that lots of data yield a more-accurate analysis, but when we see a person being rude, we conclude that this is a rude person. Surface versus deep structure. Why do we do this? "Probably because the surface structure is explicit, obvious," says Willingham. "And just as obviously, the deep structure is not explicit."

So why not teach deep structure? We can, but it's abstract and difficult for students to grasp. If taught the principle of large data sets, they naturally ask for examples, which takes the teacher back to surface structures.

The good news, says Willingham, is that students (and adults) can make the connection between deep and surface structures if (a) they've learned a lot about the subject, and (b) they see several examples linking deep and surface structure (*Oh, this is that sort of problem*). One technique: ask students to compare two solved problems with the same deep structure but different surface structures.

He says that "extensive stores of knowledge" about a subject are very helpful to critical thinking in open-ended problems. Here's how:

- First, knowledge of parts of similar situations can be "snapped together" when solving complex problems. For example, experienced chess players remember patterns and can quickly see the strengths and weaknesses of their positions and their opponents'.
- Recognizing clumps of information allows working memory to handle more, freeing up mental bandwidth for higher cognition. An experienced chess player sees a king, a castle, and three pawns in a corner and clumps them as one defensive unit.
- Knowing more about a topic makes it easier to deploy thinking strategies; students are more likely to remember something like being sure the experimental and control groups

are comparable if they've read several articles on the subject and gone through the same process.

What does all this mean for teachers? Willingham says that while teaching generalizable critical thinking skills is very iffy, he's confident about the usefulness of teaching critical thinking within each subject area. Here's his four-step plan:

- First, identify what critical thinking looks like in each domain – history, mathematics, literature, science, art – and practice using it. In history, it's not enough to teach students to “think like a historian.” They need to learn, for example, to interpret documents in light of their sources, corroborating them, and putting them in historical context. Learning to read like a scientist is quite different, since scientific documents are written in a consistent format.

- Second, identify the content knowledge students must know in each domain. This knowledge is “a crucial driver of thinking skills,” says Willingham. Knowing the details of a historical era is crucial to doing a critical analysis of an original source.

- Third, decide on the sequence in which students learn factual knowledge and skills. “We interpret new information in light of what we already know,” says Willingham “The right preparation makes new learning easier.”

- Fourth, decide what skills need to be revisited across K-12, because students will forget a lot. Skills should be practiced with different content, and their repetition must be assured and planned. Cross-grade coordination will greatly improve students' learning of critical thinking skills.

Willingham closes with these assertions: (a) Even in the absence of a comprehensive K-12 plan, individual teachers can still make important contributions to their students' critical thinking; (b) Students can learn these skills at a young age; Piaget's theory about a rigid sequence of thinking capabilities has been proven wrong, says Willingham; (c) All students should be taught critical thinking skills, avoiding the trap of believing that lower-achieving students need the basics first; (d) Assessing critical thinking is expensive and time-consuming because to get accurate information, well-trained assessors need to listen to students thinking aloud while answering challenging questions.

“This means that designers and administrators of a program to improve critical thinking among students must take the long view,” concludes Willingham, “both in the time frame over which the program operates, and especially the speed with which one expects to see results. Patience will be a key ingredient in any program that succeeds.”

“How to Teach Critical Thinking” by Daniel Willingham in a June 2019 *Future Frontiers* Occasional Paper (New South Wales, Australia), <https://bit.ly/2JIGipw>; Willingham can be reached at willingham@virginia.edu.

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2. Norms for Meetings

(Originally titled “The Power of Team Norms”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Kathryn Parker Boudett and Meghan Lockwood (Harvard Graduate School of Education) say that shared agreements about how groups work together “can play a powerful role in eliciting the breadth of perspectives that is needed for a group of educators to tackle hard problems.” Why? Because the default setting in some groups is that those with less positional power hesitate to speak up, while those whose group has historically had power dominate. It takes an explicit conversation, say Boudett and Lockwood, to level the playing field and have equitable and productive discussions. Surprisingly, they add, norms can also boost the “joy factor” in collaborative work.

How should teams go about setting norms? Some start from scratch, while others look at an existing list and tweak it. Boudett and Lockwood often use the *Meeting Wise* norms as a starting point (they recommend having no more than 5-7):

- Take an inquiry stance.
- Ground statements in evidence.
- Assume positive intentions and take responsibility for impact.
- Stick to protocols and hear all voices.
- Start and end on time.
- Be here now.

Working with teams, Boudett and Lockwood always ask whether there are any norms on the list that people can’t live with, and whether any should be revised to make them more useful.

As norms are finalized, the group has to decide what will happen when an agreement is violated. Some groups have fun at this stage, role-playing what people will do if a member is checking a device during a meeting (violating the *Be here now* norm). Role-playing is helpful to practice statements like, “I’ve noticed that we’ve been hearing from about half of the team during this discussion, and keeping in mind our norm of *hearing all voices*, I’m wondering if we might open up space for others to continue.” Some teams appoint a “norms checker” whose job is to speak up when norms are violated. This can take the pressure off other team members in a tricky situation like a principal showing up ten minutes late for a meeting.

To keep norms top of mind and prevent them from falling by the wayside after a team’s “honeymoon” phase, the authors recommend displaying them during meetings and putting a “norms check-in” on the agenda at regular intervals: *How are we doing on each one? Any revisions?* Some groups also do a five-minute plus/delta routine at the end of each meeting: what’s working well, what needs to be changed next time.

“The Power of Team Norms” by Kathryn Parker Boudett and Meghan Lockwood in *Educational Leadership*, Summer 2019 (Vol. 76, #9, pp. 12-17), <https://bit.ly/32qHwhy>; the authors can be reached at kathryn.boudett@gse.harvard.edu and meghan.g.lockwood@gmail.com.

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3. Fixing Unproductive Meetings in Schools

(Originally titled “8 Things Teams Do to Sabotage Their Work”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Allison Rodman (The Learning Loop) and Jill Thompson (Education Elements) list eight ways some teams self-sabotage, and suggest solutions:

- *Too many people* – To avoid hurt feelings, some leaders invite people to a meeting who don't need to be there, and not much gets done. Better to limit invitations to those who will contribute substance. Rodman and Thompson believe the ideal meeting has 4-6 people, allowing full participation by everyone. Jeff Bezos at Amazon has a guideline: no meeting should have more people than can be fed by two pizzas.

- *Unprepared participants* – This happens because the leader doesn't share important information, roles are unclear, there's been no follow-up on the previous meeting, or all three. The authors quote William Whyte: "The great enemy of communication, we find, is the illusion of it." This is easily fixed: people know the purpose of the meeting and what they need to bring to the table; they're expected to do their homework; meeting notes are kept and shared; and participants get gentle but firm reminders between meetings.

- *Minds elsewhere* – Colleagues are thinking of other things (a troubling interaction with a student, disappointing test results, personal issues). Rodman and Thompson suggest kicking off meetings with everyone writing what is "top of mind" on a sticky note and posting it on the other side of the room. "The physical act of writing concerns down and moving them away from the meeting table helps team members get them off their minds and focus on key priorities," they say.

- *Parochial agendas* – Participants may want to further their own goals or get credit for their contributions versus seeing the bigger picture. Leaders need to keep meetings focused on collective goals and reinforce the focus by praising contributions that move the team in that direction.

- *Oh look, a squirrel!* – Team members bounce from one discussion point to another, distracted by stories or side issues. Meetings like this may be active and fun, but they don't accomplish much. The solution: a clear agenda, alignment with school goals, and strong facilitation.

- *Not following through* – This could be the result of unclear goals, lack of closure at the end of meetings, and/or leaders' failure to execute. "Accountability is one of the hardest competencies for teams to fully master," say Rodman and Thompson, "because it takes time and follow-through to keep individuals on the hook." Regular check-in meetings are helpful.

- *Stymied by silos* – Turf-specific interests from grade levels, content areas, and cliques can prevent teams from focusing on the best interests of the school and its students. Being very explicit about schoolwide goals and interests can put local interests in perspective. Creating cross-functional committees may also help.

- *Meeting to be meeting* – Convening just because it's on the calendar is a waste of time if there's nothing to talk about, say Rodman and Thompson. Leaders shouldn't hesitate to cancel a scheduled meeting or shift to e-mail exchanges if the meeting won't add value. "8 Things Teams Do to Sabotage Their Work" by Allison Rodman and Jill Thompson in *Educational Leadership*, Summer 2019 (Vol. 76, #9, pp. 18-22), <https://bit.ly/32sglTE>;

the authors can be reached at arodman@thelearningloop.com and jthompson62610@gmail.com.

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4. Leading High-Quality Class Discussions, Part 2

In the second half of this *Chronicle of Higher Education* “advice guide,” Jay Howard (Butler University) continues with suggestions on classroom discussions. (The first half in Memo 794 addressed setting norms, asking high-quality questions, and maximizing participation.) In this segment, Howard looks at ways to ensure that discussions are “focused, fair, and inviting for all students.”

- *Address overparticipation.* “Dominant talkers are typically more extroverted and willing to process material aloud,” says Howard. “They may wander around a topic, figuring out what they think as they speak. More-introverted students need to gather their thoughts before sharing them in class.” Students who speak less in class often have a love/hate relationship with those who talk a lot. On the one hand, there’s resentment at a few people hogging the stage, sometimes sharing too much personal information. On the other hand, students who aren’t prepared or don’t like to talk in class can sit back and let the eager students do the heavy lifting. Nonparticipating students often turn and look at the big talkers, nonverbally signaling that it’s okay for them to speak on behalf of the class. The more a discussion revolves around a few dominant students, the less likely the instructor is to “cold call” others.

How can instructors deal with this dynamic and allow reticent students time to process and get more actively involved? Howard’s suggestions:

- Have all students write silently about a discussion question, turn to share ideas with a neighbor, and then take part in an all-class discussion.
- Explicitly invite nonparticipating students to join in: “Let’s hear from someone who hasn’t spoken up yet” or “Now I want to know what those of you at the back are thinking.” This signals to the dominant talkers that it’s time to let others join in.
- Give all students three poker chips as they enter the classroom; each time they speak, they put their chip into a basket, and they can’t speak after they’ve used the third. Also, all students must “spend” their chips by the end of the class.
- Use an object like a Nerf ball; only the student who has the object can speak, and when finished, that student decides who will speak next and passes the object.

- *Use quizzes to check on pre-work and launch discussions.* Howard suggests several approaches to have short tests do double duty:

- In the opening minutes of class, have all students write responses to a question that draws on the reading they’ve done. Then randomly call on a student to read or talk through their response.
- Give students a question ahead of time and ask them to come to class prepared to share their answer, then random-call on one or two students.

- Ask students to complete a brief online quiz an hour or two before class (multiple-choice and short-answer questions) and start class by highlighting (anonymously) an exemplary response (“What makes this a particularly good answer?”) or one that contains a common misunderstanding or error in logic (“Where and how did this response get off track? How could the writer have made it better?”).

• *Frame discussion questions up front.* Howard suggests handing out questions before students read an assigned text, helping them focus on key points, concepts, and controversies as they read. These questions will boost the quality of subsequent discussions if they are:

- Relevant to students’ lives;
- Analytic in scope, pushing students to read between the lines and make connections;
- Focused on the big points of the text.

During discussions, simple strategies are often most effective, says Howard, for example: having students repeat a key idea out loud, pointing out a particularly effective response – “That’s it! Did everyone hear what Omar just said?” – and summarizing before moving on.

• *Ask about the “muddiest” point.* In the closing minutes of class, have all students write about the topic or idea they felt was the least clear that day. Those can be highlighted and clarified at the beginning of the next class. An alternative is to ask students to jot down the most important points from the class – their biggest takeaways.

• *Encourage participation by students who may not be speaking up.* In some classrooms, female students, English language learners, and students of color may not be getting enough air time. Howard has these suggestions:

- Provide discussion questions before class; this is particularly helpful for English learners.
- Orchestrate small-group or paired discussions, which get all students speaking, and are usually more comfortable for students who might feel marginalized or less confident about their English skills.
- Recognize that some students may not have had the same outside-of-school experiences as others, and be careful making references or allusions that assume privileged experiences and may trigger the “imposter syndrome” – the feeling that they don’t belong in the class or school.
- Don’t call on a student to represent their gender, race, or ethnicity.

• *Decide whether to grade students on class participation.* The pro argument is that students who sit passively in class aren’t learning as much, and grading participation creates an incentive for silent students to speak up, even if it’s uncomfortable. The con arguments are: (a) it’s very difficult to keep track of who’s speaking and how much; (b) it’s even harder to evaluate the quality of student comments; (c) that means grading participation will be subjective and possibly inaccurate and unfair; (d) introverted students may be under severe stress if they are pressured to participate; and (e) it’s unfair that extroverted students are rewarded for being extroverted.

Howard seems persuaded by the con arguments and advocates maximizing small-group and pair turn-and-talks, which are less stressful for shy students and get many more students

actively participating. He also suggests having students self-assess on their participation at the end of each class or at intervals during the school year. This relieves the instructor of the challenging task of keeping track of participation, and also gets students reflecting on their own contributions.

- *Decide how to deal with incorrect, unsupported, misguided, and offensive remarks.*

Publicly calling attention to off-base comments can put a damper on student participation, but instructors don't want to let offensive comments go unchallenged or have students remember false or misleading information. Howard suggests:

- Affirm, then correct – for example, “You got the first step correct but then ran into a common misunderstanding” or “Okay, that’s one strategy. But it’s not as effective as others. What’s another approach?”
- Invite a rejoinder – for example, “That does a good summarizing the liberal viewpoint, but let’s play devil’s advocate for a minute. If you wanted to rebut that position, what evidence would you present?” or, “Josh, assume for a moment that you believed the opposite. How would you challenge the argument you just made?”
- Deal respectfully with off-topic comments – for example, “You’ve lost me there. Sorry if I’m slow on the pickup today. Explain the connection for me” or “We’re not on that subject yet. It’s easy to get off track here. Who can help us out and redirect us to finish what we were discussing?”

• *Deal wisely with controversial topics.* Howard says these can add depth and relevance to the curriculum, but they can also cause problems. He suggests:

- Up front, establish ground rules on civility and arguing with relevant evidence, and guide students to depersonalize difficult topics and disagree agreeably.
- Relevance is the key criterion: does the topic serve curriculum goals?
- Instructors shouldn't abuse their power by imposing their point of view, but a school may allow them to chime in after a pro-and-con discussion by students.
- The tactic mentioned above can also be effective: “Imagine you are an advocate for the other view. How would you challenge your initial position? Where are the weaknesses in your argument?”

“How to Hold a Better Class Discussion” by Jay Howard in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 26, 2019, <https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/20190523-ClassDiscussion>; Howard can be reached at jrhoward@butler.edu.

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5. Historical Simulations Gone Wrong

In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, Jennifer Gonzalez says that classroom simulations can be a powerful way to give students a deeper understanding of historical events and other curriculum content by creating empathy with historical figures. “Once they’ve walked in the shoes of the people who are actually part of a given situation,” she says, “students should, in

theory, reach new levels of understanding about that situation.” Effective simulations include mock trials or acting out the parts of historical figures.

But there can be serious problems with classroom simulations of events where people experienced violence or trauma – for example, slavery, war crimes, and the Holocaust. Gonzalez interviewed history professor Hasan Kwame Jeffries (The Ohio State University), who has written and spoken on this subject. He believes that with traumatic and violent events, it’s impossible to do a true simulation without getting into serious problems with parents. “So then what are you left with?” he asks. “You’re left with not only the potential for traumatizing children, but you’re reinforcing contemporary inequality. We cannot divorce the present from the past.” Poorly chosen simulations can reinforce stereotypes rather than disrupting them.

There’s also the possibility of trivializing negative events, or leading students to fool around to alleviate their discomfort, which prevents them from taking the lessons seriously. Jeffries believes this can happen with some online simulations as well. “We have to be careful of the gamification of history,” he says. “One of the most common online simulations is about enslaved people running away. I actually like the idea of having students think about the tough choices and decisions that it would take for somebody to escape slavery, but you have to create the right scenario for students to understand what the issues are.” It’s very difficult for online simulations to include enough detail and depth to do justice to these events, which means they may trivialize them.

What should teachers do instead? Jeffries suggests using high-quality literature or other texts to learn about phenomena, then asking students to think about and discuss the decisions people made in those circumstances. Rather than asking students what they would do if they were that historical figure, he suggests asking what that person did, what options did they have, and putting themselves in that person’s shoes. Jeffries advocates doing this frequently, so that students are regularly asked to imagine how other people experienced events and dealt with serious dilemmas.

Won’t this text-based process make history less engaging? “Education is not always entertainment,” says Jeffries. “We just have to accept that. Sometimes it’s just sitting down and literally having a conversation, getting students – even at the younger ages – just to think critically about things in conversation, in dialogue, without trying to make it entertaining. Because it is traumatic. And we have to treat it with the sensitivity it deserves.”

“Think Twice Before Doing Another Historical Simulation” by Jennifer Gonzalez and Hasan Kwame Jeffries in *The Cult of Pedagogy*, July 7, 2019,

<https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/classroom-simulations/>

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6. Online Psychological Inventories for School Teams

(Originally titled “Testing Your Team’s Types”)

In this sidebar in *Educational Leadership*, Tara Laskowski lists several online tools that can be used to generate helpful insights about members of a school team:

- Myers-Briggs – This classic personality type inventory, putting you in one of 16 categories, can be taken online for a fee: <https://www.mbtionline.com>
- High 5 – This is a free, short version of the Gallup-developed StrengthsFinder test: <https://high5test.com/strengthsfinder-free/>
- DiSC – A way to see how each team member gives and receives information; Crystal is a free version: <https://www.crystalknows.com/disc>
- Implicit Bias - Developed at Harvard University, University of Virginia, and University of Washington: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>
- Emotional Intelligence - An online test of people’s ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotions: <https://globalleadershipfoundation.com/geit/eitest.html>

Note that the inventories may require registration or providing personal information before sending results.

“Testing Your Team’s Types” by Tara Laskowski in *Educational Leadership*, Summer 2019 (Vol. 76, #9, p. 11), <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/current-issue.aspx>

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About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 48 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 60 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTML version as well.

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

All Things PLC
American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Next
Education Update
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
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Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Reading Research Quarterly
Responsive Classroom Newsletter
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Education Gadfly
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Professional (formerly Journal of Staff Development)
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time Magazine