Creating Classroom Environments for Talent Development

Thomas P. Hébert, Ph.D.
University of South Carolina
thebert@sc.edu

Books that Inspire and Guide: Tom’s Top 10 Favorites

Odd Velvet by Tara Calahan King & Mary Whitcomb (1998)

Key Issue(s): image management; creativity; being alone; peer relationships
Description: Velvet doesn’t exactly fit in, but soon she is able to show her classmates just how empowering it can be to simply be yourself.

Weslandia by Paul Fleischman (2002)

Key Issue(s): being labeled “different”; creativity; image management; heightened sensitivity; individuality
Description: Entrepreneurial, creative Wesley stays true to himself when others want him to fit in. Eventually his teasers and tormenters realize that conformity may not be the best way to go.

Tomas and the Library Lady by Pat Mora (2000)

Key Issue(s): culturally diverse learners; positive role models; creativity
Description: Tomas, the young child in a family of migrant workers, develops a meaningful relationship with the librarian as he falls in love with books.

The Paper Bag Princess by Robert Munsch (2005)

Key Issue(s): image management; gender role expectations; individuality
Description: Elizabeth, a strong-willed young princess, fights off a dragon and decides not to marry the arrogant, shallow-minded Prince Ronald.

The Big Orange Splot by Daniel Pinkwater (1999)

Key Issue(s): creativity; identity development
Description: Mr. Plumbean lived on a street where all the houses were identical. When a seagull drops a big splot of orange paint on the top of Mr. Plumbean’s home, he decides to paint his house to represent his life dreams. When his neighbors resist his ideas, he succeeds in slowly convincing them to do the same and the neighborhood becomes a far more interesting place where people are comfortable expressing their individuality.

*Thank You, Mr. Falker* by Patricia Polacco (2001)

Key Issue(s): gifted/learning disabled; relationships with others; perseverance; artistic giftedness
Description: An autobiographical account of an artistic fifth grader’s struggle to learn to read.

*Ish* by Peter Reynolds (2004)

Key Issue(s): individuality, creativity
Description: A single reckless comment from an older brother turns a young boy’s artistic expressions into painful struggles. A younger sister helps him to recognize and appreciate the unique quality in his creativity.

*An Angel for Solomon Singer* by Cynthia Rylant (1996)

Key Issue(s): being alone; image management; relationships with others
Description: Homesick for the Midwest, Solomon Singer spends his days in New York City unhappy and dreaming of a happier life. One night he strolls into a special diner and eventually realizes that, once you find a friend, everything else tends to fall into place.

*Testing the Ice* by Sharon Robinson (2009)

Key Issue(s): facing one’s fears
Description: As a testament to his courage, Jackie Robinson’s daughter shares memories of him, from his baseball career to the day he tests the ice for her, her brothers, and their friends.


Key Issue(s): being labeled “different”; empathy in gifted children
Description: A young boy is shunned at school because he sprouts flowers every full moon. He makes a distinctive pair of shoes for a classmate who appreciates his special abilities.
**A Quiet Place** by Douglas Wood (2005)

Key Issue(s): being alone; identity development; creativity
Description: A vivid description of the special places that a child can go to be quiet, to be alone, and to imagine.

---

**Ball of Yarn**

With your students, form a large circle, shoulder to shoulder. Gently toss a large continuous ball of yarn around the circle to form a colorful web. With each toss, students are to call out the name of the person they are throwing to and say something they admire about the receiver. When the web is created, participants spend time reflecting on the experience in a class discussion.

Some of the personal insights that may evolve from the group:

- We are all connected.
- We can create beautiful things if we work together.
- It is very pleasant to hear someone unexpected say nice things about you.
- It may be more fun to work together than to work alone.
- The joy on people’s faces as they were complimented made me happy as well.
- I felt that I was with a special group of people.

Canfield & Wells

---

**The “I Can’t” Funeral**

Canfield and Wells (1994) shared a creative strategy they discovered from a teacher. The following excerpts will give you the idea. It’s a great example of high quality teaching, incorporating cognitive, emotional, and kinesthetic learning.

The teacher began by instructing the students to make a list of all the things they could think of that they thought they couldn’t do - their own list of “I can’t”s. For example:

“I can’t hit a home run over the fence.”
“I can’t do long division.”
“I can’t write creative stories.”

The teacher, at the same time, wrote her list of “I can’t”s: “I can’t lose weight, no matter how hard I try.” Several students filled an entire page with “I can’t”s and proceeded with a second page. When the children had finished, the teacher instructed them to fold their papers in half and bring them to the front of the room where she placed all of their “I can’t” statements into an empty shoebox. When all of the students’ papers were collected, the teacher added hers. She placed the lid on the box, tucked it under her arm and headed out the door and down the hall. The students followed the teacher.

Halfway down the hall the procession stopped. The teacher entered the custodian’s room, rummaged around, and came out with a shovel. Shovel in one hand, shoebox in the other, the teacher marched the students out of the school to the farthest corner of the playground. There they began to dig.

They were going to bury their “I Can’t”s! The digging took over ten minutes because most of the fourth graders wanted a turn. When the hole approached four feet deep, the digging ended. The box of “I Can’t”s was placed in position at the bottom of the hole and quickly covered with dirt.

At this point, the teacher announced, “Boys and girls, please join hands and bow your heads.” The students complied. They quickly formed a circle around the grave, creating a bond with the hands. They lowered their heads and waited. The teacher delivered the eulogy.

Friends, we gather today to honor the memory of “I Can’t.” While he was with us on earth, he touched the lives of everyone, some more than others. His name, unfortunately, has been spoken in every public building - schools, city halls, state capitals, and yes, even the White House. We have provided “I Can’t” with a final resting place and a headstone that contains his epitaph. He is survived by his brothers and sister, “I Can,” “I Will,” and “I’m Going to Right Away.” They are not as well known as their famous relative and are certainly not as strong and powerful yet. Perhaps some day, with our help, they will make an even bigger mark on the world. May “I Can’t” rest in peace, and may everyone present pick up their lives and move forward in his absence. Amen.

At the conclusion of the eulogy, the teacher turned the students around, marched them back into their classroom and held a wake. They celebrated the passing of “I Can’t” with cookies, popcorn, and fruit juices. As part of the celebration, the teacher cut out a large tombstone from butcher paper. She wrote the words “I Can’t” at the top and put RIP in the middle. The date was added at the bottom.
**Going to Boston**

This activity is a variation of an old memory game called “Going to Boston.” In this variation, the first student says, “I’m going to Boston with my suitcase and in it I have my smile (here the student offers some characteristic or competency that is treasured). The next student then says, “I’m going to Boston and in my suitcase I have Juan’s smile and my skills at computer games. The third person says, “I’m going to Boston and in my suitcase I’m carrying Juan’s smile, Sally’s skills at computer games and my liking for other people.” Continue until every group member has had an opportunity to insert a treasured characteristic.

Before beginning this activity it might be helpful to have each student pretend to “pack a suitcase” or trunk with self-perceived positive qualities and to draw a picture of the trunk with the qualities in it. Older students could symbolically represent the qualities with their drawings. For example, a heart represents love, a joystick could represent skills at computer games, and so on. You could ask them to discuss the following question: What is the biggest “item” in the trunk - that is, the most treasured quality?

Another variation: Pack the trunk with successes. Ask students to identify their biggest success to date. Teenagers can play the “Going to Boston” game using their successes. For example, “I’m going to Boston with my suitcase and in it I have straight A’s on my report card.”

Dr. Lillian Stover Wells

**The Six O’Clock News**

Have participants write a TV news report beginning with a dateline and telling something that the writer might do in the future. In other words, the six o’clock news becomes a kind of “hoped for” autobiography. The newscast should elaborate briefly on the major events of the writer’s “proposed” life.
When these are completed, set up the room as an informal TV newscast studio with four or five of the participants, each in turn reading her autobiographical human interest item. For example:

January 6, 2013

A TV 8 Exclusive!
Yesterday, a young American woman named Maria Gonzalez was elected president of Mexico. Ms. Gonzalez is the first U.S. Citizen to be elected president of another nation and also the first non-Mexican to be elected to major office in that country.

Ms. Gonzalez’s climb from obscurity in Chicago to prominence in world politics is almost unbelievable. Her early professional career was teaching. She had taught at the high school and university levels before moving to Mexico to help develop that country’s economy. In 2010, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Canfield & Wells

The Dear Me Letter

It is important for students to integrate and find meaning in their experiences. A “Dear Me” letter at the end of an exercise or a class can serve this purpose. It can also serve as an effective means of ongoing evaluation for the teacher.

Ask each student to individually take time to integrate her experience by writing a letter to herself. Incorporate them in journals. Suggest questions or statements to facilitate the writing such as:

• What was the point of the session?
• What was the low point?
• I learned that I . . .
I felt . . .
I relearned . . .
What was unique about your response?
How honest were you when you were sharing with the group?
What about your behavior did you like most?
What about your behavior did you like least?
I need . . .
I am concerned about . . .
I wonder . . .
This class would be better if only . . .
If only I . . .
I appreciated myself for . . .

Joel Goodman
in Canfield & Wells

Stress Inoculation

Ask whether any students have gone to the doctor to get an inoculation (shot) to prevent mumps, chicken pox, measles, or any other disease. (Groans and head shakes.) Why do they think they got these shots? Do they always work? What about flu shots? Do they work most of the time?

Explain that stress inoculation is a technique that helps people face stressful situations that can’t be avoided, like taking a big test or going to the dentist. Point out that, like
being vaccinated against a disease, using stress inoculation techniques can prevent you from having stress or keep you from suffering as much as you might. Part of stress inoculation involves making positive coping statements before, during, and after a stressful situation.

Discuss the fact that when we know a situation is going to be unpleasant, we often tell ourselves how awful or terrible it is going to be. As a result, we may actually cause the situation to be just as bad as we think it will be. Invite students to name those stressful and unavoidable situations they have experienced. From those generated, choose one situation to illustrate the use of positive coping statements. For example: Giving a 5-minute report on the USSR in class next Friday.

**Positive coping statements before the situation:**

- It’s only a 5-minute report, not 30 minutes.
- I don’t have to go first, so I can model my report after the good ones that come before it.
- I did OK on this last year.
- I’m not going to say negative things to myself.
- I’m going to be OK.
- I can deal with this!
- It’s OK to be nervous.

**Positive coping statements during the situation:**

- I’m doing my best - that’s all anyone can ask.
- I can handle this.
- Take 3 deep breaths and try to relax.
- It will be over in a minute.
- One step at a time.
- I can always look at my notes.
- I really want to share my ideas with my classmates.

**Positive coping statements after the situation:**

- I did it!
- I can relax now - it’s over.
- I handled the situation pretty well.
• I’m proud of myself!
• I can hardly wait to tell _____ about how I did.
• I can do this again in the future and succeed.

Have students brainstorm stressful situations they think they will face in the near future. Have the group brainstorm statements that could be used before, during, and after each situation.

Morganett

Helpful Resources


