

## **MI, IT and Standards: The Story of Jamie**

by Walter McKenzie

As the Information Age continues to unfold, educators at all levels are faced with several competing factors in promoting teacher efficacy and student achievement: brain research, instructional technology and the move towards state and national standards. Because these interests come from very different groups of stakeholders, educators often make the mistake of assuming that competing interests cannot also be compatible. After all, if the bottom line of each of these movements is the best public education possible, then there has to be common ground upon which to build. Still, brain research is readily embraced by the constructivist movement and standards and accountability by the instructivist school.

Instructional technology seems to fall somewhere in between, often trying to be all things to all stakeholders, which may well be why it is having such a difficult time pleasing anyone. Regardless, if educators can embrace the best from each of these camps, they can come out on top for themselves and their students. The key is to stop addressing these stakeholders with an “all or nothing at all” approach. You can teach using constructivist theory and meet the expectations of state and national standards!

Consider the story of Jamie, a fourth grader I had in my classroom the year the state of Virginia first counted student Standards of Learning (SOL) test scores. In fourth grade the only test we were responsible for was Virginia History, which actually not only included the state history from 1585 to the present, but civics, economics, anthropology, sociology, geography and current events. Students entered fourth grade with some exposure to Jamestown but little else. For the best and the brightest in my class, passing that state mandated SOL test was going to be a challenge. For Jamie it was going to be a struggle. You see, he came from a disadvantaged home where he had little of the experiences and material advantages of his peers.

From day one Jamie walked into my classroom stirring things up letting it be known “I hate school.” I firmly set up expectations for him and followed through with consequences those first few weeks so that he had the structure to get back into the swing of things. With his red hair, freckles and striking blue eyes, Jamie was always a site to behold. Often unkempt and rarely rested upon his morning arrival, Jamie pretty much raised himself and ran the streets.

Anyone who has ever taught probably remembers their own Jamie somewhere along the way. Moreover, Jamie’s school records read like the running record of a struggling student: consistently low report grade grades, identified as needing remedial math and reading assistance since first grade, tested but in the ‘gray area’ where he could not be identified for any other special services. Aside from ninety minutes a day when he went for Title I instruction, Jamie was all mine.

Not that I sized up the situation that way at the time. I was much more preoccupied with the daunting task of preparing my students for the Virginia History SOL test. The fourth grade team met several times that August and early September discussing strategies for meeting the challenge head on. Three of my colleagues were simply overwhelmed with the sheer volume of content we had to cover to prepare children for the test. They decided to use the time-tested drill and skill approach in which students would be hit daily with large amounts of information that they would be made responsible for memorizing.

Study guide packets and nightly homework to reinforce information were their plan for reinforcing what was taught.

One other teammate, Ms. Donohue, shared my sentiments that simply focusing on covering such a vast amount of content would not be enough to help these kids pass that test. We wanted to tap into what we knew about how children learn, especially with regard to Gardner's multiple intelligences model of human cognition. We wanted to come up with ways to make the learning experiential, meaningful and memorable. We were all under the gun to have our students pass that test, so we were glad to swap ideas and discuss our options. But as the dust settled it was clear that Ms. Donohue and I would be on our own. We would work together to try and prepare our kids for the SOL test and the other three teachers would work together in a more traditional approach to meeting the state standards.

What I have realized since then, is that the difference between the two of us and our three colleagues was a basic assumption we made. The three teachers opting to drill and skill their students to prepare for the state test were operating under the assumption that in order to successfully pass a pencil and paper assessment, students needed to learn through pencil and paper tasks. This is certainly understandable. It was how we all were taught as students, and on the surface it makes sense.

Ms. Donohue and I, however, were willing to gamble on the fact that in order for our students to master all this material, they were going to need to learn using all their intelligences, and that when the time came to take the standardized test – if the students had truly mastered the material through the different paths to learning – they would be able to apply their knowledge base and determine the correct answers well enough to at least pass the required 70% mark set by the state. It was indeed a gamble. We were actually frightened to be taking a different tact from our three colleagues. After all, our professional reputation was at stake in making sure these students were ready and able to pass. If we were wrong, our jobs may be in jeopardy.

The one thing Ms. Donohue and I agreed to work on as two combined classes was a weekly SOL Olympics – or Solympics as we came to refer to them – in which the two classes would compete with one another each Friday in different competitions which tested their mastery of the Virginia History material we were covering. This was a great motivator for the students, as the two groups became very close and they looked forward to the weekly get-togethers. Beyond this, both classes worked individually through projects and units of instruction that involved all the intelligences.

In the early fall we built a Powhatan wigwam in the classroom and studied the ways of the native people of Virginia. We took on the roles of the English settlers and the Native Americans and held a pow wow in which we danced, sang, played original wood instruments, wore costumes and prepared shellfish and vegetables to share. I remember how excited Jamie got as we prepared for this event and what a leader he was the day of the pow wow. He was so fascinated by the clams and their anatomy, he was eager to share his knowledge of bivalve body systems with anyone who would listen. It was an early turning point for Jamie as he conceded there may be some reasons to come to school after all.

As the Fall continued I assigned each student a research project on a colonial craft and we studied the colonial period Christmas traditions in Virginia as a class using Internet resources. By December we took a field trip to Colonial Williamsburg, and those kids were so primed when they got off that bus they kept out tour guide hopping all day with questions and ideas to share. It was an incredible trip. But the culminating event for this unit was having a colonial Christmas day in our classroom, where we invited other classes, parents and community members to come in and see us in period costume sharing what we each had learned about a specific colonial craft, all in the atmosphere of colonial Christmas customs. There was candle making, woodworking, stitchery, arts crafts, medicine, carolers and so much more all taking place at once as we entertained and informed visitors. It was a magical day – and you guessed it.

My fondest memory was Jamie teaming up with two other boys demonstrating woodworking. You've never seen a nine year old work harder non-stop all day hammering, sawing and sharing his expertise with onlookers. Jamie was truly finding his niche in school.

At about this time, I remember one Friday's Solympics that was being done in a Jeopardy format. The question was "Why had the colonists on Roanoke Island been left on their own while the ships returned to England, and why did it take three years for the ships to return?" The rule was each class had one chance to answer and then the question was up for grabs. Lisa, a very high functioning young lady in Ms. Donohue's class attempted to answer first, explaining that they had to return to England for supplies. While this was true, it did not explain why it took three years to return. Brittany from my class was then up to try and earn the points for her team, but she too could not recall what caused the delay in leaving the new colonists stranded for three years. So the question was up for grabs.

There was an uncomfortable silence as both classes needed these points to win the game, but no one seemed to have the answer. When suddenly, Jamie's hand shot up with a look of surprise even on his own face. I called on him and he blurted out, "Because Queen Elizabeth needed the ships to help fight a war against the Spanish Armada!" He was right and the class cheered him all the way to lunch. This was the first time it registered in my mind that Jamie was truly retaining information. It wasn't just that he was having fun and finding his place in the classroom. He was soaking up information in the process. I was very pleased for him.

Upon our return from winter break, I wanted to review everything we had studied through the Fall and take a thorough look at Virginia's role in the American Revolution. To accomplish this task, I rewrote the lyrics to songs from the Broadway show 1776 and had the class learn the songs, take on roles, and put on the play for anyone who would attend. It was a hit, and by the time the class was done they knew well of Jefferson's role in writing the Declaration of Independence and Richard Henry Lee's role in getting Virginia to vote for independence.

The Spring rolled on in likewise style. To study Virginia as the mother of presidents, we sponsored an online collaborative project known as the Presidents' Project through which we researched and created a web page about Thomas Jefferson <http://surfaquarium.com/tj.htm> and other classes from around the country researched and created home pages about Presidents from their home states. In learning about Virginia's role in the Civil War (the battles of Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville and Spotsylvania all took place within ten miles of our school), we learned Civil War songs, made an encampment, drilled carrying mop handles, and ate hard tack, salted ham and biscuits to experience the war first hand.

The entire time, mind you, we were reading the approved Virginia history textbook and completing all kinds of tasks to fill in the blanks with names, dates and facts as we worked our way along. We also practiced filling in bubbles on sample standardized test sheets and discussed strategies for figuring out the correct answer on a multiple choice test, using a process of elimination. But if you asked any of those kids what they remember most about that fourth grade year, they'd tell you about the crafts, cooking, singing, dancing, building, performing and competing they did to experience everything they could about Virginia History.

Ms. Donohue and I had no idea how our kids were shaping up as May approached. Certainly we had done everything we felt we could to prepare our students. But all of these different units and projects took time away from rote learning and there was certainly the nagging doubt that we had sold ourselves down the proverbial river by chasing our ideals about what is instructionally best for our children. Our counterparts were no more confident, wondering how much their students would be able to retain and recall when they finally sat in front of that standardized test. In a perfect world we would all come through this unscathed,

students would do well regardless of our pedagogy, and we would all feel more secure about how to address these new state standards.

Jamie was a special concern for me, not because he hadn't made many strides socially and personally throughout the year, but because ultimately his weakness was reading and the state test was all text. He may know all kinds of important facts from our many different learning experiences, but would he be able to read well enough to show off his stuff on a standardized test? I hoped against hope that this would be the case; that even Jamie could pull off enough recall to get at least 70% on the test.

The day of testing came and went. Students took it in stride and gave no indication that they felt they did especially well or especially poor. We teachers each pored over the test as our students took it silently, trying to reassure ourselves that yes we had indeed covered all these items in some way, shape or form during the year. At the end of test day, all five of us got together in a panic as we realized one test item on the New River in the far western region of Virginia had been overlooked by all of us. We had covered the Potomac, the James, the Rappahannock, the Shenandoah; but the New River? Who would have guessed? It was a seeming omen to all of us that our worst fears may have been realized – that perhaps we had not prepared our students as well as we should have. What an awful feeling! After all was said and done we all were in the same boat with the same fears. Would any of us be able to say 70% of our kids had passed this test?

June rolled in and along with it came the SOL test results. Personally I couldn't bear to look. But Ms. Donohue wasn't afraid to take the bull by the horns. She spread out those class results in front of her and before I knew it she was in my room whooping and hollering. Two of the five classes passed the test – hers and mine. We both scored above the 70% mark! We were so elated that our students had been able to succeed faced with this seemingly insurmountable load of material to master; it was a true moment of validation for our constructivist approach to standardized testing. For the first time in my career I felt certain about my constructivist beliefs. We had put everything on the line to stick to our guns and it paid off! For the last time in my career I worried about those educators who warned that constructivist teaching could not meet the demands of standardized testing. I now knew better.

Later that day I sat down with all my students' individual test scores to see how they broke down. Student after student there was clear indication that learning had occurred and that they had truly mastered the content they had been taught. I was gratified by their success. It had all been worth it. Then I came to Jamie's scores. I was dumbstruck. Here was my special case, the child who had been struggling to simply be promoted to each new grade level since Kindergarten, and he scored in the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile on the Virginia History SOL test! He outscored almost every other student in the class, and came through clearly demonstrating that he was able to convert his hands-on learning experiences from across the months into successful recall on the day of the test. Whatever his reading difficulties may have been at that point, he was able to compensate for them and show everyone his best effort. I was so proud of Jamie!

I spoke with Jamie's Title 1 teacher to share his success, and she indicated that she was not at all surprised by the results. She related how Jamie had blossomed as a reader that fourth grade year. He had been working with her since Kindergarten and she had noted how much his attitude towards school had changed, and how everything else seemed to be falling into place for Jamie now. As I put together the composite of Jamie's year my astonishment was replaced by a sense of being humbled by his growth and accomplishments.

Yes, I had always subscribed to multiple intelligences theory and integrating instruction across the curriculum. I sounded like I had strong convictions and I did strive to implement these instructional practices. But there was always that doubt cast upon my convictions by colleagues who did not subscribe to constructivism. Now I knew that it was true – children don't have to live and die by paper and pencil

tasks in order to master state standards. Even under the most intense pressure to lay it all on the line, addressing all the intelligences carried the day.

If you are one of those educators who believes that you must teach in the same pencil and paper world that standardized tests live in, I would invite you to challenge your assumptions. Kick them around, give them a nudge or two and see if they withstand some scrutiny. If at the end of the process you still hold on to those beliefs, then I applaud you for your willingness to at least consider the possibility that there may be other ways to help children meet these standards. If, on the other hand, you come away more willing to try different paths to learning – to open up your classroom to the types of instruction you were willing to use before state standardized testing ever came into play – then the Jamies of the world will applaud you. For in that one courageous act, you will have allowed those students who may never thrive in a pencil and paper world to have the chance to succeed in spite of themselves. And what's in it for you? You'll be amazed at the sense of relief you feel as you rediscover the reasons you got into teaching in the first place -- to help children learn!

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