Motivating, Nurturing, and Letting Go: Student Persistence and Ultimate Success
Distinguished Faculty Lecture
Rob Jenkins
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It is indeed an honor and also considerably intimidating to be here today. As I struggled with topics in preparation for this event, I took time to reread the addresses of several previous Distinguished Faculty Award winners and found myself feeling a bit overwhelmed. I hope that my discussion will have even half the impact on you that theirs have had on me. I feel a certain responsibility to not only share some aspects of my teaching philosophy with you, but also to give you a taste of the noncredit program at Santa Ana College, or more correctly stated, Santa Ana College School of Continuing Education (SACSCE). Let me first say that I believe most every full-time and many part-time instructors at SCE are as qualified as I am to speak on the subject I have chosen. In fact, most of what I have learned in the field comes from the amazing examples of faculty I work with. Several of our sixteen fulltime instructors are known state and nationwide for their contributions to their fields.

A few years ago, David, one of my sons, returned to the United States after spending two years in South Korea. He had traveled the country, learned many customs, and was fluent in the language. I was amazed at how fast he had learned the language and the relationships he had developed over a relatively short period of time. He had studied Korean in high school, but confessed that the instruction did little to prepare him for immersion into another culture so different from his own. In the summer after returning from his experience, he and I made our way back for a ten-day vacation where he promised to show me the sites and introduce me to his friends. I had a difficult time with the language, but David was there most of the time to translate and to caution the chefs at restaurants to go easy on the kim chi when serving me. I found that I would learn a word and soon forget it. I finally gave up trying and relied on saying *"Ahn nyoung ha say yo"* and "*Kam sah hahm nee dah*", or "hello" and "thank you" respectively.

On the eighth day of our trip, we were staying in a small hotel in Geum Chone, a few hours train ride from Seoul. David left me in our hotel room and went to visit a girl in Seoul. He, of course, didn't want his father along, so I agreed to hang out in the hotel room and maybe walk down to a restaurant for dinner. I had actually seen a "hamburger" place down the street. It appeared American-like and I was desperate for some American food. When I arrived, I was confident that I would get the meal I longed for. I was disappointed, however, that a fast-food restaurant that had all the trappings of being American, employed no one who spoke English. Fortunately, they had pictures on the menu! I pointed to what I wanted, and the young man behind the counter asked me a question. I had no idea what he was asking and told him in the best and most creative sign language that I could invent, that I didn't understand. He repeated himself, but spoke louder assuming that the louder he spoke, the clearer his words would become. Frustrated, he finally gave me something from the menu, and I timidly sat down to eat.

Somewhere in the neighborhood of 35,000 immigrants register for classes at Centennial Education Center, the Market Place Education Center or one of our approximately ninety offsite locations every year. Many come speaking no English at all. Some have high school diplomas or higher degrees from their own countries, but the vast majority don't. I routinely have students with no education at all mingled in the same English-as-a-second-language class with students having a sixth grade education and a few with college degrees. For many students, the experience is so intimidating that they don't last but a few days. In fact, many learners have reported to me that they took months just to get up the courage to come in to register. Statistics reveal in non-credit and adult education programs, such as ours, throughout the country that one third of students are at risk of dropping out or stopping out in the first three weeks of instruction (Quigley and Uhland, 2000). We know from sad experience that some students register and never attend a single class. My experience in Korea helps me to sympathize with the experience; however, the difference between these students and me is that I knew I would be home in my own country speaking to old friends and family in just a few days, while many of our students will never return home for political, family, or economic reasons. I am also highly educated already and many of our students are not. I know three languages, but most of the learners in our programs have not had experiences learning other languages.

If you ask our students why they are in our non-credit programs, some will say to get better jobs, others will say to go to college, and many in the beginning levels of ESL will say to learn English. When pressed to answer why they want to learn English, they have no real response. With no articulated goals, it is amazing that so many of our students persist. As an instructor, I am concerned about what happens to those who do not?

Whether our students are limited in academic experience, have completed some college courses, have degrees, or not; I believe there are principles that are always true, that make a difference in how students learn and how we can influence that learning. I feel fortunate to work in continuing education where these principles and the affects of following them are so visible and often transparent. It could be that the students in adult and continuing education programs share similar issues with students in credit programs; however, in our type of program the issues are magnified. They are more obvious because of the nature of open-entry, open-exit programs, the fluidness of our enrollment, and the general academic experience of our student population. My goal today is to discuss the principles that can improve student learning by identifying and meeting student needs, providing an atmosphere of success and eventually developing a disposition toward independent learning.

Our institution is about learning and about each and every one of our students. ***Teaching is the byproduct of learning*** and not the other way around. The process should start with the student not the teacher. Barr and Tagg (1995) wrote it in another way: *When we focus on instruction rather than learning, we confuse the means with the ends*. Instruction needs to be fluid enough to meet all our students' needs. This is perhaps an insurmountable order given the diversity that we face every day in the classroom. Yet, the better we understand our students, the better we can rise to the occasion. I hope none

of us are content with our ability to reach our students. I hope we all strive to improve and become better at what we do, for the sake of learning.

MOTIVATION

In continuing education, funding is earned by seat time. Therefore classes can fold if we don't maintain an average of twenty students in the class each week throughout the semester. This means that our instructors are always looking for ways to motivate each student to persist in his or her courses. To ensure funding, our program like many others throughout the country is open-entry, open-exit. This means students can register anytime, come in late, leave early, miss classes, or even dropout in the middle of the semester without repercussions. The instructor is forced to perform daily in order to maintain good attendance. If students don't feel they are learning, they leave. I personally love this challenge because it keeps me continually reflecting on how effective I am as an instructor, how I might improve, whether or not I am reaching my students, and most importantly whether or not my students are learning.

Perhaps one of the greatest indicators of measuring our effectiveness as teachers, in both noncredit and in credit, is student persistence. This is not to be confused with retention. Retention, when speaking about adult education programs, is merely a statistic that indicates how many students stay in a program over a period of time. Persistence, on the other hand, is the degree of internal motivation each student has to continue in his or her education despite obstacles and set backs, and it is manifested by the learner completing or not completing his or her goals. The obvious consequence of students being highly motivated to stay in a program is that more opportunities are afforded for learning and therefore success. When I was in Korea, I didn't persist in trying to learn the language, probably because I didn't need to survive in that environment for an extended period of time, and I didn't see any particular benefit to me. The language was only relevant to me while visiting the country, but it would not be of any use to me after returning to the United States.

If persistence is specific to each student and is an internal attribute, how can instructors influence it, or perhaps the question might be better stated, how can understanding persistence, help us to motivate students? Consider the following chart.

The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) identified six strategies for addressing learner persistence. I have taken their chart and added the outside ring to further clarify how instructors can help students through obstacles and challenges. Although addressing all six areas is important and instructors can influence them all, I will focus on what the instructor can do to support learning directly.

When I had my discussion with the young man behind the counter in Korea and attempted to communicate with little or no success, I was not comfortable. He didn't grasp my problem, became frustrated, and the results were not what I had anticipated. It is human nature to avoid places that create discomfort and had I not been so hungry, I probably would have left and gone back to the hotel with a growling stomach. The original NCSALL chart describes safety in the following way:

> An environment in which learners feel that it is okay to make mistakes, they are respected for what they know, and they are equally valued in the program regardless of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, etc.

Research on second language acquisition is replete with citations indicating that errors and error correction on the part of the student are a part of learning. This is absolutely true in our classes. Some cultures see it as dishonoring the instructor for students to admit that they don't understand. In many ESL classes, learners may respond to the instructors' question, "*Do you understand?*" with a confident nod, but in actuality, the affirmative response is far from the truth. Instructors can't possibly measure the effectiveness of instruction and more importantly the level of learning without probing for what students really know beyond a yes/no response. Learners, who are confident that their responses will not result in an embarrassing admission of inadequacy, will attempt, challenge, and demonstrate their knowledge in the classroom. The environment, of course, overlaps with building a community in the classroom because all students must be willing to support and not hinder legitimate attempts to engage even when hearing others make mistakes.

How can we possibly know the needs of the students? How can we know what their concerns are? How can we help them avoid the obstacles or give them tools for the obstacles they will encounter if we don't know what they are? What makes them tick? Why are they even in our classes? I suppose we could have long interviews with each student and probe and counsel for hours on end instead of teaching, but more effective is the engagement of students, their lives, and experiences into each class period, leaving no one out. This leads us to Student-Centered Instruction (SCI). McCombs and Whistler (1997) provide us with the following definition:

> Learning is more meaningful when topics are relevant to students' lives, needs, and interests and when students are actively engaged in creating, understanding, and connecting to knowledge.

Chickering & Ganmson (1987) wrote:

> Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just by sitting in class listening to teachers, memorizing prepackaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate to past experiences, and apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves.

When we engage in SCI, we are learning about our students. We better understand how to reach them and how to best help them to learn. It is all about learning. SCI is not only an evaluation tool, but it is also effective teaching. The next section in the persistence chart is Quality of Service. NCSALL describes this as follows:

> High-quality instruction, program practices, and structures that are driven by the needs of learners and that are engaging, supportive, and relevant to their daily lives.

The following chart is also from McCombs and Whistler (1997). In this chart, we can see how SCI looks in the classroom:

How Can You Implement Student-centered Instruction?

Less	**More**
Whole class instruction including lecturing and teacher-led discussions	Time spent in small group discussions and individual inquiry
Busy work such as worksheets, dittos, and workbook exercises	Student-focused inquiry on topics of interest to students
Time spent by students reading textbooks and basal readers	Time spent reading/using authentic materials
Emphasis on content coverage with large quantities of material introduced and memorized for later evaluation	Time spent learning to understand the content being learned
Emphasis on ability groupings that tend to "label" students	Emphasis on heterogeneous grouping and inclusive instruction; differentiated instruction
Reliance on standardized testing and published assessment programs	Reliance on portfolio assessment that includes both teacher-developed and self-assessments

Notice that the left column is not labeled "bad" and the right is not labeled "good". The activities in both columns might be seen in a classroom that engages in SCI. I do believe that the right column is extremely important and should occur in every class, but there are times when the left side is also important. We can't lose sight of the fact that some of our students learn better from lecture than group work even though this may seem foreign to many of us. We also need to teach students to be independent learners which means on occasion in their lives, they will have to study things that don't peak their interest or on other occasions when they cannot discuss their finding with colleagues. Having said this, if our goal is to encourage our students to persist, SCI becomes a key principle to engage them.

NURTURING

I taught ESL at night for several years for Santa Ana College School of Continuing Education. It was an enriching experience. I was most impressed with the dedication and diligence my students demonstrated in just getting to class. Some of my students were working 60-hour weeks. They were coming to class at night, finishing at 10:00 PM and going to work the next day at 4:00 or 5:00 AM. I realized then that I owed it to them to be prepared and conscientious. I was concerned that they would not see value in my lessons and leave because their sleep was more important to them. I also had students who came in an hour late every night because of their work schedules. They would often sneak in the back and try to pay attention, but because they were late, they seemed to feel out of place. After losing many students that way, I realized that it was my responsibility to get them engaged. I tried many things, and I still try new things in my day classes today. What I discovered is speaking directly to them when they come in and saying their names while getting them involved in either the discussion or with a group made a tremendous difference. Ziegler and Durant (2001) suggest that engagement is the key to reaching our students, and although they speak specifically about Adult Basic Education classes (ABE), their ideas really apply to all instruction. They suggest that the major factors that affect learner engagement are the confidence students have that they will learn in class and the quality of the relationships they develop between the teacher and other classmates. To engage students is to nurture them.

My wife and I have four children. The great miracle of holding a new born baby in my arms is a great experience that I look forward to doing again when we have grandchildren. When our children were babies, my wife was expert at recognizing their needs. When I only heard crying, my wife would hear "I'm hungry, or tired, or angry". The babies were completely dependent on us and couldn't do anything on their own except for those things that as a father trying to help wished they didn't do! Our students, on the other hand, do not need to depend on us for everything they learn. To nurture our students means to help them meet their needs, but ultimately we have to help them realize their potential to think creatively, critically, and independently. When I say nurture, I don't mean provide everything. I mean to nurture their creativity, critical thinking skills, and independence ultimately leading them to become independent lifelong learners.

Our college mission statement stresses that we want to prepare students for lifelong intellectual pursuits. It becomes essential, therefore, that we teach more than just the content of our discipline. Not only does it become our responsibility to teach math, English, history, or science, but also interpersonal skills that will enable students to continue their education for their lifetime. The best way I know to encourage critical thinking and creativity is through cooperative learning techniques. I know that most of you have heard about these techniques and many probably use them daily. Nevertheless, allow me to say just a few words about them. When we engage our students in cooperative learning, they are developing cooperative skills. Mary McMullin, in a training module she developed for the ESL Teacher Institute, listed some of these skills including active listening, paraphrasing, checking for understanding, resolving conflict, building consensus, and expressing appreciation. She also stresses in this module that

cooperative learning fosters “positive interdependence” or students working together to accomplish something and “individual accountability” where each student becomes responsible for a role in the activity.

If this lecture were three or four hours long, I might touch on some of the research that is available on learning styles, brained-based research, and multiple intelligences. Certainly all of these ideas are important when discussing meeting student needs. However, for the sake of time, let me summarize my thoughts on this information. We are all different, our students are all different, and each class we teach is different. I am a firm believer that if we are truly conscious of all our students’ needs, our classes for the same course taught from semester to semester must change because our students’ needs are necessarily different. This means that our delivery may change, we may emphasize different aspects of the content, and we may approach instruction in a variety of ways. One increasingly popular process for dealing with diversity when speaking to student needs and learning styles is differentiated instruction. Those who promote differentiated instruction base their ideas on three basic beliefs. These are clearly defined on the Sacramento City Unified School District website:

- Students differ in their learning profiles
- Classrooms in which students are active learners, decision makers and problem solvers are more natural and effective than those in which students are served a “one-size-fits-all” curriculum and treated as passive recipients of information.
- “Covering Information” takes a backseat to making meaning out of important ideas.
  (http://www.scusd.edu/gate_ext_learning/differentiated.htm)

Teachers who incorporate differentiated instruction allow the students and their needs to shape instruction.

Hiemstra and Sisco (1990) wrote: “The potential of humans as learners is maximized when there is a deliberate effort by instructors to provide opportunities for participants to make decisions regarding the learning process.”

Differentiating instruction absolutely has ties to cooperative learning and places its greatest emphasis on grouping students.

One of the unfortunate outcomes of open-entry, open-exit programs such as ours in continuing education is that we don’t always have the capacity to accommodate all those who want to attend. We can continually maintain high attendance, but sometimes if we are not careful, the students at the end of the semester are not the same ones we started with. Students don’t persist for a variety of reasons, but I believe one of the principal causes of student flight has to be that we fall into the trap of teaching to the middle, and we don’t meet the needs of all our students. Of course, this phenomenon doesn’t only happen in our type of program; it is just much more obvious. Differentiating instruction proposes grouping students in a variety of different ways over the course by interests, learning styles, ability, or skills. Giving students in these groups tasks that vary in complexity and depth provide more opportunities to learn in diverse ways. It also allows

teachers to be inclusive and reach the students we may have considered in the past on the fringes. This is a worthy topic to study.

Some of you know that I have been involved in textbook writing for several years now, and you may also know that before I became a tenured instructor here, I was a publishing sales representative. I found that as a rep, I would try to find rationale in the textbooks I was selling. One of the ongoing complaints from many school coordinators and department chairs expressed to me was that many of the books from all publishers were essentially the same. In ESL books, the same activities were repeated over and over again with new context and content. I later called this a template model or a cookie cutter approach to developing a textbook. Naturally this approach is easier and certainly faster than creatively coming up with unique ideas for every page. The answer some publishers gave to these complaints was the unsubstantiated claim that students need familiarity more than variety. This may be in support of teaching to the middle but certainly not to a diverse student population with a variety of learning styles. In contrast, I would contend that we need as much variety as possible to reach more students. Of course our activity choices must be based on what we perceive our students need and what they demonstrate they need. I keep a list of about 30 activity types and when I hear of a different technique, I add it to my list. In this way, I have resources close by when I begin to plan. Yes, teaching to all students and not only to the middle is a planning challenge, but the dividends are priceless.

I would like to make one more comment before moving on. It is imperative that we recognize that learning is a process and not just a single step where we place knowledge into our students' brains. Our planning must reflect the process. That means that we design plans that walk students through each step. We warm them up by starting with known and moving to a presentation and discovery where students are exposed to new information or the unknown. We design many ways and create diverse activities for this information to be internalized and allow students to express themselves creatively and through critical thought and then finally provide additional opportunities for them to experience the new information outside of the classroom or in ways that they can see genuine application to their own lives. Throughout this process, we check for understanding and make changes when needed.

This planning can be challenging, but ultimately very rewarding; however, once we have developed and implemented our plans, we can not pat ourselves on the back and tell ourselves that we have completed a job well done. We need to continually follow up, adjust where necessary, and plan long term.

I think one of the most important lessons we as instructors can learn is that there is a difference between learning a concept and acquiring it. Although acquisition is often used to describe language progress, it is evident to me that this concept can be applied to everything we do. Think of acquisition as the state where the concept or skill becomes second nature. In ESL, we might say students have acquired a grammar structure such as the third person singular "s" in the simple present when it flows off the tongue and is written without ever thinking about it. Reading acquisition might be when the words on the page no longer merely *represent* an idea, but strung together *become* the concept or idea itself and generate more unique and creative ones.

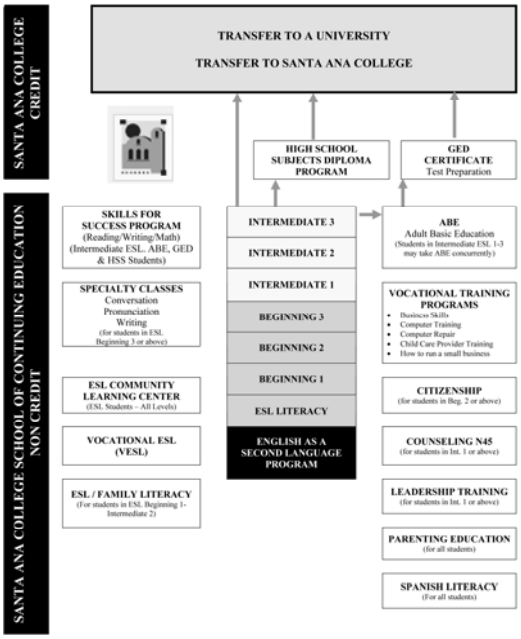
The implications to me are obvious. We need to be aware that acquisition comes to different students at different times and that teaching a concept and witnessing evidence of learning does not necessarily mean acquisition. We as teachers should be patient and recycle information on a regular basis until acquisition has been reached. In recycling, we address different learning modalities or styles to meet the needs of all our students and give them more opportunities to acquire every concept we teach.

Nurturing therefore means that we need to have a keen understanding of our students' needs, understand how they learn, and provide opportunities for them to think creatively and critically so they can become independent lifelong learners.

LETTING GO

I mentioned in the beginning that many of our non-credit students are not sure why they are in school and where they are going. Just as important in the classroom are the motivations and expectations our students have about each class they take. Why are students in the classes they are in and where are they going after they complete our classes? How can the classes we teach prepare them for other classes they will take in the future or for challenges in life? These questions are important because we don't teach or should not teach in isolation. Are we reflecting on where our students are going after they leave our class?

In continuing education, this perhaps is an easier task because our students' progress from one class to the next can be less complicated than it might be in the credit programs. The following chart demonstrates the movement our students follow. As you can see, there is a core path of classes they take from the beginning levels and in addition, a few electives they can take along the way. Students may jump to vocational courses and follow a different path, but overall there are fewer choices.



I have labeled this part of the discussion "Letting Go". What do goals have to do with letting go? The question really is, letting them go where? If we don't know why they are taking our classes or where they are going after our classes, how can we meet their needs? I teach Beginning 2 ESL. As you can see on the chart, Beginning 3 ESL follows. I am very well acquainted with Beginning 3, I have taught Beginning 3, and I know what my students need in order to be successful in this level and what they need in order to go on to the intermediate levels. This information is very helpful to me in my Beginning 2 class because I can identify, based on student progress, how prepared they will be and what I need to emphasize in my teaching. In fact, on the first day of the semester, I surprise my students by telling them that they are not in Beginning 2. After they calm down a bit from thinking they are in the wrong class, I tell them that we are changing the name of our class to "Preparation for Beginning 3". I then go on to tell them that everything we do in the class is to help them prepare for the next level.

Once we have established expectations, we as a class are in a much stronger position to establish goals, so that we can all agree on what is important and eventually assess progress. We can help our students develop specific, measurable, attainable, reasonable, and time-bound goals (Smart goals). It is essential that we permit our students to make their own goals. We can lead them, but ultimately they won't be vested in goals that are made by others. We often hear how powerful setting goals can be, but do you know that according to Damon Burton (1983), only 5% of the population establishes goals? I wonder if we have express goals for ourselves and for our classes.

Faculty in community colleges statewide have spent a lot of time developing student learning outcomes (SLO), and we will be using these to assess our students' progress and our effectiveness as instructors; however, if our students don't know what they are, and have no means to evaluate themselves, the SLO's become less effective and less

meaningful. Once goals are established, students can better assess their own learning. As they become successful, they gain confidence, which to me is one of the most important student attributes that lead to overall success. In other words, students should be part of the assessing process.

I truly can't imagine a more fulfilling career than helping our students through the process of finding themselves and being self-motivated to find success in their lives. Every time one of my students comes back to me with a success story, like getting a high school diploma or graduating with an AA degree from Santa Ana College or landing an architecture job in San Francisco, I am motivated with a renewed vigor to plan and learn about my students, so they can all become successful.

With this desire that I am sure all of us share comes at times for some of us a desire to hold too tight. I want so badly for my students to be successful that I help them too much. Is this possible? I believe it is. Success to be meaningful and to lead to confidence must come with the price of effort and a real possibility of failure. This may sound harsh to some of you. I understand. It sounds harsh to me. In ESL, it is very easy to line everything up so students have no challenges and where they can successfully complete any task. We are tempted to hold their hands through every activity, give them all the answers to every question and every test a head of time, and basically do it all for them. Then when faced with a problem outside of class, they find themselves looking for the teacher instead of creatively and critically dealing with it.

Letting go means to give our students challenging opportunities in the classroom that lead to success, so they can gain confidence in their own abilities. This will be of greater benefit than anything else we can do for them. We assess our students regularly, but they also must assess themselves. We allow them to do this by giving them opportunities to revisit their goals regularly and assess their progress.

CONCLUSION

I would have loved to elaborate more on many of the areas I spoke to today, but the focus of this discussion is really about meeting student needs as a means of motivating them to persist in their education ultimately finding success. I personally have studied these principles for years and believe deeply in them, yet find myself falling short. I believe that we as instructors should strive to be self-reflective and evaluate our teaching every day.

Due to our size and about 550 part-time teachers who teach for Santa Ana College School of Continuing Education, the sixteen fulltime faculty members at our institution have to do some instructor evaluations. I tell the following story in an online faculty development course entitled "Practical Ideas for the Adult ESL/EFL Classroom".

> The observation and evaluation process has made me aware that instructors often see their teaching differently than other instructors or students see it. One particular evaluation comes to mind. I was observing a very low adult ESL

> literacy class. In the class, the instructor was speaking in what can only be described as “baby talk”. I was concerned that the learners were not getting an appropriate model. I debated whether to note what the instructor was doing in her evaluation or to talk to her personally about it. I opted for the latter. I was amazed when she thanked me. She had no idea how she was talking and immediately changed the habit. She told me later that this was the first time she had really reflected on what she was doing in the classroom. From that day on, she started being more mindful of other things that she wanted to change.

I want to conclude by briefly suggesting that we all engage in some kind of formal or informal reflective teaching. I get so wrapped up in so many issues and am so involved in the goings on of my life that sometimes I have to stop and remind myself why I am here at all. For this reason, I have established for myself a mission statement for my teaching. Might I suggest we all create a personal one? It certainly helps me get on track when I lose focus. May I share mine with you?

> My goal is to give students challenging opportunities to be successful in their language-learning experience so they develop confidence and become independent, lifelong learners.

It follows that as we become more reflective of our teaching, our students and our programs, we begin to have more influence on our students’ lives, our noble profession becomes nobler, and our tasks become lighter and more fulfilling. When we motivate and nurture our students, we are engaged in good teaching that will naturally lead to student learning. We can then have confidence that our students can use the new skills they have acquired beyond the classroom and throughout their lives. I appreciate having this opportunity to speak to you all and hope that we can continue to develop a community amongst ourselves where we seek to improve our performance for the benefit of our students.

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