
Preface

The Story of Cindy

As an educational consultant for 25 years, I've worked with tens of thousands of teachers from all over the world—in almost every U.S. state and throughout Europe, Asia, Australasia, Russia, and the Middle East. As you can imagine, the educators I meet teach different subjects to students of all ages, hailing from a wide variety of cultures and very different socioeconomic backgrounds. Despite this diversity, from downtown New York to the outback of Australia, the schools and districts I work with have remarkably similar needs: Their teachers are reaching out for new ideas and strategies to make their classrooms more effective—to better engage students, to improve learning outcomes, and to make teaching less combative and more collaborative. It seems that, no matter where they live on this increasingly connected planet, kids are united in their disconnection from traditional teaching practices (Klein, 2008).

This is why I developed the *Green Light* approach to teaching—simply meaning something different from “chalk and talk.” Green Light strategies are dynamic, interactive, and fun, but they have a very serious premise: They are designed to maximize student recall and understanding by drawing on the latest brain-based educational research.

In 2006, my travels brought me to Virginia Beach, Virginia. In attendance were two young fifth-grade inclusion-level teaching partners, Cindy Rickert and Emma Jeter. As they confessed to me later, Cindy and Emma had signed up for the course merely as a means of picking up their required professional development points for the year. They actually had no interest in the course material.

All that changed after the first day of the workshop, which demonstrated a variety of practical ideas for dynamic teaching. Inspired and excited by strategies they believed would engage their reluctant students, Cindy and Emma talked late into the night about a plan to radically

change their classrooms. Ignoring my suggestion to gradually incorporate the strategies, they decided to start the new school year with a bang: They would build a new classroom format from the ground up, changing their physical environments, teaching styles, and lesson plans. Unbeknown to me, they left my workshop to begin a complete classroom makeover—starting with moving furniture and painting on the floor!

By the time the 2006–2007 school year started, their classrooms physically looked different from the previous year, sounded different from other classrooms in their building, and—most important—felt different to the students. Encouraged by their principal, Cindy and Emma created a safe learning environment where learning was fun, where every lesson had a sound track, and where every student had a chance to succeed. To their intense satisfaction, the level of student engagement, and academic results, in their classrooms started to improve rapidly.

Inspired by this early success, Cindy and Emma became “conspirators in creativity,” challenging each other and working together to design and develop new approaches to teach information in ways that were both enjoyable to students at the time and highly effective in the long run. Kids who had largely been given up on by the school started to achieve. Attendance, literacy, and numeracy soared.

That year was a success in many ways and on many levels—for the two teachers as well as their students. However—right or wrong—these days in education, success is measured by test results. And here is where the best evidence of their efforts emerged. Cindy’s and Emma’s students passed the year-ending Virginia Standards of Learning exams at extraordinary levels. Students who had *never passed a single standardized test in their lives* not only passed but achieved high marks in many categories as well. The experiment of pulling the new strategies together into a focused approach to dynamic teaching was a stunning educational triumph.

In the middle of that school year, I began research for a new book, consulting hundreds of teachers who were already using dynamic teaching strategies about their most successful new lesson ideas. Cindy and Emma contributed several keys lessons to this book, *Green Light Classrooms: Teaching Techniques That Accelerate Learning* (Allen, 2008).

After that first year, Cindy chose to remain in teaching while Emma left to devote herself to being a full-time mother. Cindy continued to develop her new teaching ideas, enabling her bottom-stream students to achieve outstanding test results year after year. I stayed in touch, watching her progress with interest, and eventually we began to copresent at workshops and conferences.

At these events, during our constant conversations about education, I began to realize that Cindy has terrific, natural instincts about how to keep

students engaged. I often asked her why she had introduced a particular new strategy in her classroom, and she would frequently reply, “I’m not really sure—I just tried it, it worked, so I keep doing it!” My workshop had given Cindy a handful of ideas, but she had run with them—coming up with hundreds of practical new applications and approaches. At that point, her new ideas weren’t based on educational research or theory; Cindy was merely relying on her instincts to create the best possible learning conditions for her students. And, they were working with astonishing results.

I was amazed at the accuracy of her instincts in establishing and maintaining an effective learning environment and their alignment with current research about student-engagement strategies and brain research. Essentially, this is why I have asked Cindy to share her ideas with you in this book.

As coauthors, our aim is to help you to replicate Cindy’s success—to establish a dynamic classroom, quickly, and for very little, if any, cost. Thus, this book takes the ideas, strategies, and techniques Cindy developed to transform her fifth-grade classroom and expands them into a widely adaptable strategies for any elementary teacher, at all grade levels. It’s a practical how-to guide for anyone who wants to dramatically improve educational outcomes and has the courage to try something different.

We believe every elementary teacher can transform his or her own classroom into a dynamic learning experience for their students, leading to the same results Cindy is now experiencing in her classroom year after year.

This belief is based on an important premise: If the conditions for success are properly set in place and orchestrated throughout the year, *every child can learn*.

As Cindy’s three-year experiment proves, if you create a dynamic learning environment, *all* of your students—no matter what their educational challenges—will achieve a measure of success beyond both your and their expectations (Jensen, 2006; Jiaxu & Weiyi, 2000; Rossi, 2002). And, you will create a positive learning spiral that builds confidence in the most reluctant learners—giving them the ultimate educational gift: hope.