

Love Letters: Six Essential Actions That Support Growth (for Both Teachers and Students)

by Julie Wright

Dear Teacher,

Sometimes I wonder—how long will I be able to last? How long will I be able to say education is my life’s calling when it feels as if education is suffocating me, giving me no space in which to breathe? But then I say to myself, *They need me—my colleagues and the kids—they need me. And I need them!*

Nevertheless: how do we wade through all the noise? how do we persevere?

In the mid-1990s, Margaret Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Ryan (*A Simpler Way*, 1996) suggested that to break out of the traditional thinking around organizational structures and behavior, we need to structure our work around the themes of play, organization, self, emergence, and coherence. They suggested that including play in all we do, through creating and experimenting, provides opportunities for discovery. When we play, when we create, when we try things on for size, we give ourselves permission to discover new possibilities. There is a natural tendency for the world to organize, to take shape, to find order. When we think of organizing as a process, we begin to look for patterns in our work that make a difference. These patterns invite us to focus on our sense of self, or identity, and doing so fuels our curiosities, ignites our visionary self, and helps us create in ways that make us thrive. We live in a relational world with connectivity at its center. Wheatley and Kellner-Ryan remind us that “relationships change us, reveal us, evoke more from us.” Their ideas hold true in our work together as educators because being open to relationships gives us the security we need. We know that being clear about our center and curious about our future feeds our interest in continually creating something new. Our work in education is a dance. We have to find our balance and find our flow. Our dance brings with it dynamic pieces and parts that are always in motion. It’s why our work is so interesting. We are always in search of making meaning and ultimately finding wholeness. What happens along the way—creating a clear vision, embracing newness, seeking coherence—is what matters.

When we, as educators, identify and hold on to the most authentic, transferrable practices, we make the complicated less complicated. I call these *actions that support growth* because they ground us as we search for new ways of seeing, doing, and being. In schools, the partnership between and among teacher(s) and student(s) makes our work come to life. This is especially true when both groups see themselves as an integral part of growth and success. Working together to build community creates a foundation for everything else we’d like to accomplish. Being curious invites us to inquire, make meaning, and design something in a new way. We realize we can create deeper work when we find mentors to guide our way. This helps us gain a mental picture of what we are striving toward. Our work becomes real when we put it out into the world for others to see, interact with, and learn from. This journey is bookended by our willingness to reflect. What worked? What didn’t? What will I do now based on my new understanding? It’s



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the piece of the puzzle that starts the process all over again. The authenticity that this growth cycle requires allows us to “say what we mean and mean what we say” and gives us the energy to live within a practice that inspires students to do the same. The actions I mention—the ones we want or, better yet, need to be transferable—are parallel for teachers and students. These actions need to be part of who we are in our classrooms. When we live them in our practice, we push them (or model them or represent them) in our everyday ways of being, model them in natural ways with our students.

Action 1: Create Community

Building community is the foundation for all other actions we hope to accomplish. Creating a strong community—in our classrooms, grade levels, school, professional learning groups—gives us opportunities to work together. Building community, knowing and appreciating one another, is a cornerstone to a strong system. Community gives a sense of belonging, a safe space to wrestle with ideas, a place where being vulnerable is okay. Relationships matter, and if we work within a community where we believe we are stronger when we think together and smarter when we build ideas off one another, we can grow together. Our community should give us a sense of family—when someone is missing, the circle isn’t complete. Another component of knowing we are living, breathing, working within a community is sharing a set of common beliefs. We can come to our work with different experiences and different ideas, but we need a foundation of shared beliefs. When we do, we have a better chance of centering our work and moving in a cohesive direction toward shared takeaways and end goals. We know we have done a good job when we our work is noted by outsiders (when visitors sense our community, know what we stand for, what we are working to create, and naturally become a part of it) and transferred beyond our school walls (when our community expands because we search for ways to widen our circles). Our community should feed us in ways that allow us to inquire, design, find mentors, share, and reflect.

We Create Community When We . . .	Our Students Create Community When They . . .
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spend time with and get to know our colleagues <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “Get to know you” opportunities within and outside the school day • Build, create, plan, and solve problems together <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ School/classroom routines, lessons, units of study • Commit to learn with and from one another <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Observation protocols • Go beyond our own classroom walls to inspire or support others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively engage in experiences that help them live their beliefs about the importance of community in ways that create a sense of family in their classrooms, grade level, school, and beyond <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “Get to know you” games/activities ○ Morning message ○ Community circle/town meeting ○ Service-learning experiences • Celebrate learning of both self and others <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Student-led conferences ○ Student-led open houses/family nights

Action 2: Inquire

What is education about if we aren’t curious? Inquiry is such a great source of energy because it inspires us to keep thinking, keep questioning, keep digging in. When we inquire, we give ourselves permission not to have all the answers. When we inquire, we invite vulnerability and varied paths to solutions to complex

questions and tasks. Curious about the world around us, beyond our school walls or school projects or school requirements, we continually ask questions and feed our thinking by undertaking new inquiries. This practice is so important because inquiry propels us to study, and when we study we design, find mentors, share our ideas, and reflect on our process.

We Inquire When We . . .	Our Students Inquire When They . . .
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take advantage of daily opportunities to get smarter about something new <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Study students' accountable talk, interactions, approaches to learning, work products ○ Live each day through an on-going lens of inquiry: what is working? what needs tweaking? what is making the biggest difference in helping kids grow? • Participate in professional learning opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Professional book studies ○ Learning Lab experiences ○ Workshops, conferences, coursework 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage in a unit of study or independent study project <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ask questions ○ Observe, research, find answers • Wrestle with questions that do not have one right answer <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Focus on why ○ Ask questions that have application ○ Ask questions that require making a judgment and/or taking a position • Feed their own curiosities by paying attention to the ideas that come out of the everyday (both within and outside the classroom) and taking advantage of opportunities to explore through reading, writing, thinking, talking, and creating

Action 3: Design

Being curious about something drives us to take a closer look. Curiosity often leads us to find clarity and urgency in ways that compel us to create. Many times, feeding our inquiry gives us the motivation and purpose for designing something. When we design something, we imagine what could be, which can lead us to create something new for the world. Design gives us this sense of never being done. It requires being okay with the notion that we may need to make several attempts before it begins to take shape or make sense. Making something, especially collaboratively, creates buy-in; we take ownership. This is true for all learners, young and old. Making something is contagious—once we've been given the license to do so, the natural tendency is to want to keep doing it. That makes designing naturally transferrable.

We Design When We . . .	Our Students Design When They . . .
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop programs and curriculum <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Curricular frameworks ○ Units of study ○ Monthly, weekly, and daily lesson plans • Create and re-create formative and summative assessments and tools (informal and formal) to better understand what our students know and are able to do <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Anecdotal records/conferring ○ Knowledge checks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create meaningful work products through end demonstrations of learning that show the world what they know and are able to do <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Stories/books ○ Digital scrapbooks ○ Museum kiosks ○ Public performances ○ How-to guides ○ Newsletters ○ Social action projects

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ End demonstrations of learning ● Co-construct staff or department meeting agendas and professional learning opportunities 	
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Action 4: Find Mentors

When we design something, we know it will not be perfect. This acknowledgment of imperfection makes the act of designing risky, but we won't get smarter/better if we don't hold ourselves accountable. Once we design something, we're posing a question to ourselves and to those we share it with. Is this as good as it can be? Could it be better? Mentors find us and we find them. They inspire us and look at our work in a new and different way. Mentors can also hold us to a higher standard of quality. Mentors reinforce the actions of community, inquiry, and design. These are recursive cycles that feed one another. Because we are part of community, because we inquire, because we design, we avail ourselves of mentors.

We Find Mentors When We . . .	Students Find Mentors When They . . .
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Find “friends” on our bookshelves that help support, nurture, and feed us when we need to figure out our next steps <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Professional texts ○ Texts in the world around us ● Visit other classrooms and schools whose routines inspire thinking for our own classrooms ● Take advantage of professional learning opportunities both within and outside our school walls 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Make meaning of text ● Figure out what a model looks, sounds, and feels like in the real world ● Search for a good example that shows vs. tells ● Deconstruct a text and analyze the moves an author made when creating it so they can aspire to do the same

(The term *text* represents written words, art, music, video, audio, graphics, etc.)

Action 5: Share

When we design something, it is natural to want to—need to—share it with the world around us. Finding the right audience with whom to share helps us define our purpose. We might share with others in our classroom/school or move beyond the walls of our local community and have a wider influence. Sharing isn't always easy and it isn't always a natural part of our work. It supports the idea that we give and receive in education and the cycle should be recursive. Pushing our ideas, our agendas, our new ways of looking at the world is what progress is. If we share in our inner circle and then move outward, we gain the confidence needed to widen our audiences with each step.

We Share When We . . .	Students Share When They . . .
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Showcase student learning through collegial or student gallery walks ● Share what we know with others <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Observations ○ Learning labs ● Facilitate workshops/professional learning sessions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Demonstrate their learning to authentic audiences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Classroom, grade-level, or schoolwide presentations ○ Public/community performances ○ Student-led open houses ○ Student-led conferences

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contribute to the professional conversation by presenting at conferences and contributing to professional journals/publications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Work products contributed to a museum, organization, or library ○ A service provided to a partner organization • Create new ways of pushing their knowledge into the world <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Websites, blogs, vlogs
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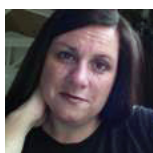
Action 6: Reflect

The truest form of knowing what we know and the impact knowing has on us is through reflection. Reflection, both internal and external, is an anchor from which to evaluate where we've been, where we are now, and where we are headed. Reflection helps us determine our next steps. The cycle begins again, because new inquiries are often tucked inside our reflections. Reflection helps us figure out if what we have learned could or should be transferred to our next endeavor. If it worked, if it served its purpose, whether our intended takeaways came to life, then we know it was a success. If not, we may need to rethink, recalibrate, inquire, and design again.

We Reflect When We . . .	Students Reflect When They . . .
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a process for looking critically at student work • Determine if the <i>what</i> and <i>why</i> worked—did our moves create our desired consequences? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Conversation ○ Written reflection ○ Coaching conversations ○ Feedback cycles/protocols 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Live a culture of critique and revision—look and listen carefully in order to make improvements and adjustments • Pause to figure out what their work means to themselves and to others • Label their own discoveries and understanding as well as confusion

Our friends and mentors Wheatley and Kellner-Ryan remind us that our daily work invites us into this dance. All we have to do is accept the invitation. Will you work to build community? Will you ignite your curiosities and challenge yourself to design? Will you call on your mentors to help guide the way? Will you help the world get stronger and smarter by sharing what you've learned? Will you reflect in order to figure out your next moves? If you are willing to join this dance, it will be easy for you to create the same dance for your students. They need you to dance so they know they can dance too!

Love,
Julie



Julie Wright is a teacher and instructional coach with over 20 years of experience in education. She's taught kindergarten, third and fourth grades and led district-wide professional development in literacy and social studies; taught graduate courses in curriculum, instruction, and assessment; and is currently the ELA Academic Director at Harlem Village Academies and a founding member of the Progressive Education Institute in NYC.