



AN INTERVIEW WITH

John Hunter

UNLEASHING POTENTIAL
THROUGH OPEN SPACE THINKING

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John Hunter is best known for his creation and implementation of the World Peace Game in the classroom—a creation so impressive that the highest ranking military personnel at the Pentagon have met with John and his students to understand the game and its approach to effectively addressing increasingly complex social and political conditions. However, this one impressive strategy only touches the surface of the amazing educational experiences John offers students to open their hearts and minds to learning. Humble, mild-mannered, and genuine, John Hunter describes in the following interview the learning environments that he and his students create together as a close community of collaborators, including the World Peace Game. To John, unleashing potential is all about relationships: about truly knowing individual students and tying learning to their interests; about sharing the classroom with kids in a way that clearly communicates that their thoughts, ideas, and feelings matter; about encouraging students to choose to hold themselves accountable; and about teachers knowing themselves so well that they are able to recognize and address their biases, strengths, and weaknesses in a way that allows them to open their minds, hearts, and classrooms to real learning—to open space thinking. At the heart of it all is a teacher who knows how to empower his students to unleash their full potential.

KG: I enjoyed reading the information about you on your website and learning a little bit about your background. Your resume is so impressive, but even more so, I am impressed with the pictures on your website of you working with children. Did you start your career serving as a teacher in a gifted pull-out program?

JH: Yes, I have pulled children out of their regular classrooms, and I have also pushed into classrooms with differentiated instruction. I have never been a regular teacher in the classroom with my own kids locked in with me forever. Gifted and talented has always been pretty much the primary thing I have taught.

KG: During a school day, how many children would you work with?

JH: Generally, five or six classes with a few smaller groups wedged in between. I would have most groups for 45 minutes to an hour. Sometimes I would have a group of children for 15-minute segments—whatever was needed. I would go into the regular classroom teachers' classes. We had planned together for me to do part of the lesson as a component that would provide gifted access for kids in the regular classroom. When I taught, it was really a jack-of-all-trades position. I worked with kindergarten through grade 5 most of my career. I started the World Peace Game with high school students, then middle school, and then intermediate grades, but my degree is in early childhood education. I got a second accreditation in gifted and talented, but the little guys are the ones I started with.

My first job interview, I asked the supervisor, “What should I do?”

She said, “What do you *want* to do?”

As a teacher, to be given that kind of open space, that kind of mandate-less position to be in where you can create out of the emptiness, it allowed me to create that kind of template for my students, where I could ask them, “What would YOU like to do today? What is your passion? What drives you?”

If the students have the interest and you build towards that, then they can come with more passion for learning.

—John Hunter at NBC’s Education Nation, 2011

KG: When you created the World Peace Game, how did you begin? Did you start with standards and integrate them into a simulation experience?

JH: Well, here’s the thing—and this is kind of the secret of the game—we were at an experimental school when I started teaching. It was kind of like a charter school, I guess, before charter schools. This was 1977. So, the standards did not really apply to us. We were rewriting the standards, so I sort of got off the hook to be able to do it my way. Of course, I knew the standards, I had been trained in the standards, but we had freedom for the students to also create standards. I’ve got old mimeographed sheets of plans for the manual for what the first World Peace Game in 1977 started out from . . . they are simple—kind of naïve—but it’s the forerunner of what we have now. I had no idea it was going to go anywhere. I just did what teachers do.

KG: I have heard a lot about the World Peace Game, and I want to know more about it. But, what is the philosophy behind the way you teach, and how does that tie into the World Peace Game?

JH: Well, to tie into your question about philosophy, the critical piece underlying this whole thing . . . is the fundamental idea of what we refer to as open space thinking. Essentially, it’s taking the teacher and moving him or her to the side. You empower children to be more in charge and more in control of their destiny and their own learning. The teacher still has a function . . . a very precise function, but it is more [about] inviting the students to be coteachers. So, when I start to plan curriculum every year, I say, “Boys and girls, the principal says we have to do this . . .” And, I list the requirements and then I ask, “So how are we going to do this?” We have a big hour or 2 discussion about, basically, how we are going to learn.

Being invited to help decide how we are going to do that makes [the students] so excited, and they start to realize that I am offering them power over their own destiny. And, who wouldn’t like to have control over their own destiny to some extent? And I have some input, too, but I get them involved; we come to a consensus about how we are going to best learn. They have all the tools I have because we are coteachers; they can pull from those tools and we design together all the curriculum [*sic*] for the year. They feel empowerment. I can have my input as a teacher and experienced person, but the 25 minds in my classroom contribute. Why should I think that the one brain of mine

knows better than all 25 or 30 kids put together plus mine? So, I always invite them to be part of the process of planning and implementing . . . not just receivers of educational instruction. That's the philosophy.

KG: How do you provide rationale to administrators that the children are addressing the standards when playing the World Peace Game?

JH: I am glad you asked that. Supportive administration is key. And, I want to say that the World Peace Game is not for every child; it's not for every teacher; it is not a panacea; it won't solve every problem; but, I *will say* (with emphasis) that the way it has become successful around the world has depended, primarily, on having caring, trusting, and visionary leadership.

Without good leadership that you know you can count on, leadership that you know has your back and you can trust them and you know that they trust you, and they trust you to be the teacher you are—not some made up ideal—then, you are free to be the best teacher you can be. That kind of administration is necessary to be able to do this kind of work—this open space thinking.

And then, of course, the World Peace Game has assessment pieces built in [to show that standards are being addressed]. The assessment pieces are not conventional. The students help codesign the assessment tools with me. I get input from other colleagues teaching the children and they have to make sense academically, but the students have the power. And actually [the assessments they develop] are much more expansive than grades or numerical data. So, we take our bag of tools, our practice, to the student-

led parent-teacher conferences . . . and the parents are blown away because the students have stacks of information to share to substantiate their learning. During the conferences, the parents say, "I never knew that my child was learning so much. I knew the grades they were making—A, B, or C—but, that does not tell me like this assessment tool does." So, we have applied this type of assessment to all the curricula. We call it self-evident assessment.

I had no idea it was going to go anywhere. I just did what teachers do.

KG: Assessment for nonconventional learning can be a challenge, but a good challenge. Aren't student-led parent-teacher conferences the best? Isn't it amazing the way the parents participate and attend meetings when their children are leading the conferences?

JH: Yes, they are so much more involved! I said to the students early on, "How are we going to evaluate this? The principal wants to know what kind of grades I'm going to give you in the World Peace Game." And they said, "Do we have to have grades?" I said, "We can go without having regular grades; the principal is going to want something, though." And [the students] said, "Mr. Hunter, how about this? You know thermometers? . . . Well, thermometers are made so that you can always see what the temperature is, right? How about if we use thermometers to measure what we are learning?" I said, "Okay, what do you mean?" So, they said, "We can get thermometers and put a whole bunch of numbers on them—maybe 1 through 10—and, then, we can take a pencil and make a graphic

like thermometers and we can shade them in. So, if [on a project] we did a 7, we could shade [the thermometer] up to 7. Then, Mr. Hunter, you can do a separate one to show how you think we did. Then, we can put [the two assessments] together and we can compare." They were saying that we could come to consensus.

The first thermometer is to measure function—how well did your solution, your idea, your program, your plan work for this unit that we are doing? Shade in what you think, from 1 to 10. As the teacher, I am completing a parallel sheet and grading them also. Then, we get together at

the end of all of this assessment. We have a meeting together, the student and I, and we . . . come to consensus. The students have input and control of their destiny and consensus with the teacher. [The students] are always empowered. They may say, "Oh, Mr. Hunter, I did a 9 on this project." And, I may have to say, "Wait a minute, what about this part, I think this should be about a 7. Maybe a 7 ½." We may argue back and forth, and we finally come to consensus. So, they are happy, we are happy, we have come to what they really think, but teacher input is allowed.

Our second thermometer is aesthetics. We never evaluate for the beauty, elegance, or gracefulness of the work. And [aesthetics] is why so much in the world is successful. They had us speak at Google about the World Peace Game. They call it "design thinking." They said, "You know the cell phone—why iPhones are so popular, John?" I said, "No, why?" They said, "It's not because of the computer in it. The computer is nothing. Everybody has a computer. It is because of the form factor. It's your little friend. It's nice to hold. It's beautiful like that. It's aesthetics that sell the phone. That's what makes it

work.” So, we have a thermometer for aesthetics. How beautiful, elegant, and graceful is your project? Is it torn, is it dirty, is stuff hangin’ off of it? Does it have misspellings? Did it come in late?

Our next thermometer is for effort. Now, the teacher does not fill in the sheet for effort, because he doesn’t know what the student did at home. The student fills out this one. Now, it may be a low score on it. You know a gifted kid may be able to do it just like that (snaps fingers). Or, they may have put 10 hours in and gotten nowhere, but at least they have a record of what they did—the sweat equity that they put into it.

The next thermometer is a big fat one. That one assesses resources. It is a big wide thermometer, and the students are to list and cite all the resources that they have used in this project. Now, these days, you get a lot of kids coming back saying, “Well, my resources on this project are the Internet.” I say, “Now, wait a minute [chuckle]! The Internet is not enough. Where on the Internet [are you talking about]?” You are teaching them the honor idea, basically. You teach them to list the sites [they visited], so that they have a history of where they went for information.

The next set of thermometers is actually a set of the taxonomies. On this one, we use Gardner’s [taxonomy]. They check which of his multiple intelligences they used in a particular project. And they know the taxonomies—I have taught it to them. Most of the kids check kinesthetic. They will say, “I like to play basketball.” I say, “That’s nice, but as a teacher I encourage you to try some other modality. So, I want to see that, by the end of the year, you have done all of these modalities.” But, at least students have a record of what they are strength-wise—what they do most and what they do best, because it is important for them to have a record of that.

And the last part, which is the most wonderful part, is a big open space on

the back of the paper. And, I say on the top in little writing, “Please list or draw all the mental steps you went through in arriving at your solution for this project.” Now, they have to sequentially go back and introspectively go through each step they [went through to] get to the answer . . . they have got to mind map. So, at the end of this unit, this lesson, they have a map of how their mind

why you couldn’t agree. “Here is my stack and this is what I said [when we met].” That is how it works. Kids collaborate with me.

Sometimes the principal does want numerical data, so we use the thermometers, put scores under each one, and add them up so that we can give the principal what they want. We figure it out so that a score [on the



worked. We do this 10, 20, 30 times during the year and [students] have a mirror of how their mind works. They can look and see the pattern through all of these assessments of how they think, how [they] respond, how they learn, even. . . . And, you take a stack of these things into a student-led parent conference, and the student says, “Mom and Dad, this is what I did this year.” You don’t have a list of A, B, C, and D. You have an explanation of “This is how my mind worked with this activity. Here is the effort I put in. See the research I did? The aesthetics part was not as good because it was torn and kind of dirty, but I did better on the next one.” They can show their parents everything. The parents are *thrilled* to have this. A stack of single sheets of paper. That is all it takes. Teachers have their input, too. You have your own stack [of assessments] as a teacher, so that you can show parents how you [and the student] came to consensus, how you differed,

thermometer] is equal to a letter grade. And, the kids all agree, so that when we hand their grades to the principals, the principals get what they want.

KG: What led you to implement the World Peace Game as a means by which you offer such a rich learning experiences to kids?

JH: It actually did start out with one big piece of plywood . . . with everything all on that one board, but I just kept pushing that envelope thinking we have just got to give these kids a chance to see and understand more . . . in a more realistic, more practical, more useful way. So, I came up with this multilevel approach—there is an undersea level, a ground level, an aircraft level, and an outer space level; so, there are four levels that basically emulate the Earth. It is made

of Plexiglas so that the kids can see through the levels and view more of everything at once. And, frankly, I thought this is really more like what the Pentagon would use when they do work. Well, [I took a group of students] to the Pentagon and they told us, “No we do not have anything like this. We have a flat panel with LED lights on it. You have a much bigger and better board than we do!” They told us that! The kids were in awe! It was a mind-blowing experience! [In our classroom] the kids stand around this big structure and, to them, it just looks like a toy store on steroids, so they are excited.

In 1978 [when I started teaching], we only had board games . . . there was nothing else much going on—no social media, no computers. My mentor, Ethel Banks at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) was an elderly woman. She had arthritis so bad she could hardly walk. She wore high heels and pearls and a dressy outfit every day to school. This is old school—this was the way you dressed to teach. She was a *master* teacher and she told me, “Hunter, don’t worry about curriculum. You are going to get plenty of curriculum. What you need to think about is who these children are—find out who they are *exactly*—find out who they really are and what they love and care about; show that you are interested in that; make a relationship. Then, once they find out that you love what they love, they’re yours. And, then, you build curriculum around what they love.” And that is exactly what I did.

KG: So, it is a focus on student interest that draws them into the World Peace Game?

JH: More inquiry-based, problem-based learning. If it’s child-interest based, that’s got to be the lead-in for me. Because, I mean, they are part-

ners with me. It’s not like a top-down, “I have the knowledge, I am going to give it to you. You cannot use this skill until I give it to you.” It’s more of, “Let’s do this together, and maybe I will learn something too!” They get excited about that.

KG: In the game, I understand that everyone plays different roles and that you plant saboteurs in the game. Having worked with many gifted kids, I have not been able to let go of this question: How do you decide who will serve in the role of saboteur? And, how does the child chosen to be the saboteur deal with the role socially and emotionally?

JH: You play a role as the facilitator and teacher. The first thing you do as a teacher is to give up power. You cannot and do not help [the children] try to fix anything. This is totally contrary to everything I was taught in teacher training. [The students] have to do it themselves. My ideas, my suggestions, are limited to my perspectives only. My idea may not be the best idea. It

col, those kinds of things to help them sort out their questions, then I have to make sure I ask probing questions. I’ve got to ask the right questions, but I cannot interfere or influence how they think and how they want to make it go, so the saboteur is just recognizing human nature—recognizing a part of life. This is a part of nature itself—we have our dark side. We have a side that says, “No you can’t, no you aren’t.” We all [experience] times when we ask ourselves if we are good enough. Even the best of us face moments like that sometimes. We can’t try to hide it or boast over it. We have to learn to deal with it, so we put that in the game. [The saboteur is] usually the highest functioning student I can find because that student has to be able to play a dual role. They have to be able to try, on one hand, to win the game—sincerely, publicly, realistically—and on the other hand, secretly try to tear down the entire game. Of course, some students love that.

Sometimes, I go to the office, and I ask the principal, “Who is in the most trouble today? That’s the one I want to talk to.” They do have to be high-functioning though; they have

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may not be the right idea. So, I have got to completely remove myself from suggesting anything. They are on their own. I have put together the procedure, the flow of the game, the proto-

to be able to do both of those things at the same time, and that’s not something that everybody can do. So, then they are my partner, my collaborator, and my coteacher. The troubles that

they create are actually pushing the critical thinking deeper and deeper all the time. The game is my big critical thinking push, but the saboteur makes that live, real-time critical thinking push that I couldn't do. Now, at the end of the game, the children are usually shocked to find out who it is. They applaud, they celebrate, they cheer, they go up and hug this child because this child made the game better; he or she made it more fun, more exciting. The children say, "We loved the way you made it more exciting and harder." So, the saboteur is a celebrated figure at the end of the game.

KG: So, how does that child find out that he or she is going to be the saboteur?

Oh, I talk to them privately [usually via e-mail]. And, of course, they can turn me down. Anybody that is asked to do a leadership role in the game can turn me down. When the leaders I choose, prime ministers and so forth, choose their team, the same applies. If they choose somebody for a role, that person can turn them down. Now, here is the reverse psychology: As the children choose, there is always somebody left at the end and, usually, [that person] feels bad about being the last one picked. So, I turn this around by saying, "You know, as people get chosen, there are less and less people left; the pool gets smaller. And, you are going to need every bit of talent in this room you can get. So, actually, the people who are left at the end are the most valuable people in the room. Everybody wants them, but they, too, can turn down those who are choosing the teams." So sometimes I see [children who are left at the end] say, "I may not let you choose me. You want to choose me? I'll have to think about it." It's a psychological thing. Nobody feels bad in that respect.

KG: How long does a World Peace Game last?

JH: It depends on the school's master schedule. We would have to go by that. I would usually start in October and we would run through to Thanksgiving. I would have each group of children once a week for maybe an hour or an hour and a half. The first 6 hours—we designed this because we have such confidence and faith in the children's abilities—are *pure boring!* Mind-numbing, analytical, direct instruction—the worst way to teach. I do it deliberately because I want to wear out

up. I say, "I expect you to read and keep up. If you have questions, stop and raise your hand, of course, but if you don't stop me, I am going. Let's go!" So, we just read through everything so fast, and they are exhausted. They are lost. They have no idea what is going on. Then, we go through the crisis document, which is 13 pages of interlocking crises, and they have got to fill in every blank for every country. And, I mess up some of them on purpose so that they cannot run ahead and fill in all the blanks. If they do, they will be wrong. And, I tell them that. I say, "If you go ahead of me, you will be wrong. You are going to mess up and you are going to be

Every piece of curriculum that I do in my class has a mark of a student on it and a mark of a student's passion on it. Something that a student loves is in that curriculum somewhere. It has to be. Otherwise . . . it is extraneous to them and some external thing that may not be relevant to their lives at all.

their analytical minds because, you know, I've got bright kids who think they can do anything. So, I basically want to unseat that convention that they know what they are doing. I want them to think that they have no clue—to really challenge them. During the first 2 days, I begin by explaining to them what the game is; I explain everything on the board—all the levels and pieces. Then, I explain how to play the game—another couple of hours. Then, we talk about the dossier, which is about 40 pages, and we go line by line. We go quickly, very fast. They have to read fast and keep

even more lost." In the end, they have spent 9–10 hours to fix every problem in the world. And, they do *every* time. They are almost going to lose sometimes. I mean, there is almost no way they can do it. And, they realistically, practically, pull a solution out that adults just could never bring themselves to deal with or even think of.

KG: So, in the end, it is a positive, challenging, and rewarding learning experience for your students?

Yes. A few years ago, I was asked to bring a group of students to the Pentagon. We got to talk to Leon Panetta (Secretary of Defense from 2011–2013) for half an hour. When we first arrived, he said, “I’ve got 10 minutes, boys and girls, and then I have got to go see the President.” He took us into his office (23 of my kids and me), pulled off his coat, loosened his tie, stayed a half an hour with us. He talked about strategy, policy, and diplomacy, and tactics with my *9-year-olds* (emphasis added). He asked, “What’s your toughest problem?” They said, “Well, climate change, of course.” He said, “Mine, too, because we have new [atmospheric] cells opening up in the northern hemisphere where we did not have them before. I’ve got new headaches. What did you do about [the climate change challenge]?” And, they told him! . . . and they talked with 2-

is what we do when it breaks down. What do you do?” and little Riley, with his suit and tie on, stood up and said, “Well, here is what I did when I was Prime Minister . . .” *The Washington Post* covered it! It was fantastic!

So, these people are trying to find answers. They said to us, “We are suffering. Boys and girls, we have been at war for over 10 years. Everybody in this room—and there are 75 people in this conference room—everybody in this room, with stars on their shoulders and all that, have all lost colleagues, have lost friends. Some have lost family members. We are all suffering. You read Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* . . . and like Sun Tzu, we are always at war. We are never winning because although we are very good at what we do, we never ever really *win* (emphasis added) because we are always at war.

coins. Panetta also coined them while they were in his office, which was such an honor. So, it gives you some hope. These people, who are hardcore warriors are saying, “You know, we can’t get out of this. We are asking children who seem to be doing something with it to see if they can help us out.” Now, that is a surreal thing.

KG: So, when you bring a group of children into the classroom, you work with the World Peace Game usually from October through Thanksgiving, but that cannot be the only learning experience you offer them. What are some examples of others?

JH: Okay, buckle your seatbelt! I’ll give you one example. You know, the idea, of course, is that the students are going to be codesigning and coteaching with me in everything. That is the first thing. So, I have a set of 25 problems that cannot be solved. They are real-world engineering kinds of problems. . . . there is no solution for them. I give them to the children one by one. They have about a month to work on each one. And, when I first give [the problems] to them, they are just stumped—stumped. There is no strategy to solve the problem. It just doesn’t work, but we have had the university nearby call us every year when we do these. They want to send their architectural and engineering students over to see what our children have done with these mystery intuition technology (MIT) projects, because they are so unusual—it is the thinking process that we like.

KG: Can you give some examples of these MIT projects?

JH: Of course! Example 1 would be: “Boys and girls, I want you to build something that shows what silence looks like or feels like.” They say, “Mr. Hunter, you can’t see or feel silence.”



3-, and 4-star generals for *three* hours! Three hours! About the problems and challenges they work with. The generals said, “We had an insurgence in the field and we do this and we do that. Here is what we do to them.” “What do you do to them?”, a Marine Corps general asked 9-year-old Sara with her pretty little dress on. Sara told them what we did with insurgents and how we dealt with them in the game. Another gentleman, a Navy admiral, said, “Our supply chain breaks down in the field. Here

How do you deal with that?” That is what they asked my children! My 9-year-old children had a discussion with the most powerful military people in the world! Army, Navy, Marine Corp, Air Force, Coast Guard—two-, three-, four-star generals. And, then we stepped out into the hall and there is 5-star General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He knew who my kids were, and he coined them. Being coined is a special military honor. He gave those children

I say, “You’ve got one month to do it. You can’t spend more than \$1 to do it. Good luck solving the problem.” They just experiment all kinds of ways. And, you know, when adults are asked to solve that problem, they come back with things like, “Let’s see, an empty box, a blank sheet of paper, a zero.”

Those are conventional answers actually. But these children, Krystal! One child [who worked on this problem] came in after lunch and said, “This is really hard. You know, I am a musician. I play the clarinet and violin, too, and it’s really tough for me to think about this project because it just doesn’t make sense to me, but, here is what I did. My parents drink Maxwell House coffee. You know they’ve got that round can. I thought, you can’t really see the beginning and end [of that can]. It’s like a cylinder; there is no beginning or end to it. I got that can, and I took some white paper, and I covered the whole

then I will stop, because I could go on all day. A student came into my classroom, and she had a 2 ½- or 3-foot box under her arm. She said, “Mr. Hunter, stick your arm in the hole in the end of the box. Nothing will bite you, I promise. Go ahead! Roll your sleeve up, and stick your arm in there; you are going to feel what silence feels like.” I said, “Well, I’m game. I trust you!” So, I rolled up my sleeve, and I started to slide my arm in the hole. As I did, the students said my face went like this (eyes got big and looked surprised). I went (pulled breath in and gasped) . . . and as my hand came out, they said my face was covered with a look of awe. Of course, all the children lined up because they wanted to feel it! Come to find out, inside, they had taped or glued little pieces of paper—little tiny strips of paper, all folded. They had taped or glued them all around the inside of the box so that the edges made

come up with and they are not in the gifted program, and you say to yourself, “There is no way they could come up with something like this and not be gifted!”

KG: As a teacher, I love all ideas! Can you give us one more example?

JH: As a teacher, you might enjoy this. We have one strategy that we use called sound drawing. It sounds conventional, but when you get into it, it is mind-numbing. I give the kids a piece of paper and I tell [them], “We are going to go through a mind journey today, and I am going to show you many ways to use open space thinking. There is nothing on this paper. With this one piece of paper, we are going to actually take you through such a high level of thinking

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can with sticky white paper because silence, you can’t see it—it is kind of blank, there is nothing there. Since I am a musician, I took my Sharpie, and I put little notations all over the can —hundreds of them—musical notations for stops and rests, stops and rests.” Then she said, “Mr. Hunter, I am going to perform [what silence looks like]” and she rolled her can across the table . . . so, it was this endless cycle of stops and rests showing what silence looks like. She just sat back and smiled, and I said, “I would have never thought of that in a million years!”

Here is a second example, and

a chamber. You just felt the one solid edge the whole way through. Just one solid chain. So as your arm went in the box, you felt these little [pieces] of paper all the way around [your arm] that just barely touched your skin. At the end [of the box], they had a big wad of cotton in there soaked in rose water, so when you pulled your hand out you got this fragrance hitting you along with the sensation from the paper. And, the student said, “That’s what silence feels and smells like!”

Oh, Krys, it is mind-blowing what some of these kids can do! And you look at some of the products these kids

that you will not even believe that this is not some university. It’s going to be amazing.”

So, then I say, “Fold the paper in half.” So, they fold it in half. I say, “Fold it in half another time. Now, fold it in half another time.” So, they have folded it three times. Then, I say, “Now, before you unfold it, tell me how many sections you think that paper will have when you unfold it?” They guess three, six, nine, 12? It’s eight sections. The children say, “Hey! That doesn’t make any sense! We folded it three times and seems



like that would add up to six!” Now, that is the math problem—the math modality. Then I say, “Take your pencil and draw over all the crease lines on your paper. You have eight sections in the paper. Now, I am going to take you into the auditory/musical modality. I am going to play eight pieces of music very quickly. I am going to ask you to close your eyes and play a piece of music. After I play the piece, I am going to stop the music and ask you to draw or color or design whatever the music looked like to you. You can’t use any ‘thing’ though—no fuzzy bunnies, no flower, no stars, no sunsets—you can only use shapes, colors, and textures. And you must draw what the sound looked like, not what it reminded you of. The whole premise is letting go of the premises somebody else has thought of to see what you come up with.”



They sit there frustrated for a while, but by number four or five, they start to get it. You can walk by and look at their papers, and you can see that what they have [drawn] does make sense, that it does look like what the piece sounds like. You try to pick music that they have never heard before. So, they do eight of those and they create some amazing pieces of artwork! And, by number four or five, their left brain gives up and their right brain opens up and the work starts to become just mag-

nificent! They have been through three modalities—mathematical, musical, and visual and even spatial. Then I say, “Stop and take a look at all of your pictures and do not move until those eight sections tell you a story or poem.” As the teacher, don’t try to imagine what they are drawing, what they are trying to tell you or anything. Wait until it comes.

They will sit there and sit there, and all of a sudden, they will start writing and you cannot stop them from writing. [Then you will hear them say things like], “This square is a chapter. This is a character . . . these are eight different characters . . . these are eight verses of poetry.”

Everything has to be child-focused. Individual child-focused. That takes more time, but it is what serves them best. That is what we are here for.

Then I tell them to put their pencils down and let them share their stories. I say, “Get into groups and take anyone’s paper. I want you to create a theatre piece. No words; only actions; only kinesthetic intelligence. Create a piece illustrating the whole story.” So, you’ve got another modality going. They are exhausted, but they are happy! They have gotten to do everything [engage in many learning modalities]! Of course, once again, you can’t grade their work with A, B, C, or D, but the mental work, the intellectual work that they had to do to get there is so astonishing.

KG: What advice would you give teachers of gifted students to empower them to gain the confidence and skills to let go and not have to be in control [JH laughs]

ter] and to let children solve problems on their own?

JH: Well, I wouldn’t dream of giving anyone advice. I am just sort of teaching like everyone else. I would say that my experience has been . . . before I got to the classroom, I had to do some work, and this is daily. It is regular, it is consistent, it is relentless, and I don’t always want to do it, but it is for the sake of the children. And that work has nothing to do with curriculum and it has nothing to do with school. I call that work *self-introspective inventory*. Basically, I have relentlessly and in granular detail, looked at myself in a deep, deep way

every day to see what my flaws are, my inhibitions, my preconceptions, my limited perspectives, my biases, my own prejudices—and they are very subtle sometimes.

So, like I said, relentlessly doing this every day for years, you start to really know yourself. And, by getting to know yourself, I don’t mean what kind of ice cream you like or whether you like Beyoncé or Justin Bieber or walks on the beach. I mean to know yourself so that when a child walks into the room, you know how your mind works. When a child walks into the room with their pants hanging down, their hat on backward, they are chewing gum, they have an attitude, I say to myself, “loser.” That will just pop up in my mind for just a second—“loser.” Then it disappears—so subtle, my own thought. I look at a kid and I say to myself, “loser!”

I have snatched that out of that kid, and that's going to affect the way that I deal with that kid forever. Now, I am a human being, and I am going to have my perceptions. I know that they are going to come. But, because I can see that I had that perception, then I can start to work with it and work it out. I say to myself, "See, that is just a momentary perception, John. You don't have to be wed to that. Let's take it fresh and see what actually happens with this child. This child could create a cure for Alzheimer's. You don't know. So, you've got to give them a chance—give them everything you've got." So, self-introspection is what I start with, and that seems to help me every step of the way. That is the first thing.

The second thing, which I have already mentioned, is knowing who your students really are and loving what they care about. Every piece of curriculum that I do in my class has a mark of a student on it and a mark of a student's passion on it. Something that a student loves is in that curriculum somewhere. It has to be. Otherwise . . . it is extraneous to them and some external thing that may not be relevant to their lives at all. So it's got to be blended in with something they love and care about—geometry, history, reading, math, whatever—it's got to be blended in with their passions somehow.

And, then, the third thing is recognizing their collective wisdom. I told you that when I first come in to the classroom, I lay it out. I say, "This is what we have to do." So, there are no secrets, nothing hidden. They are not going to be surprised by anything. I say, "Here is what the principal says we have to do, what the school says we have to do. How do you think we should do it? What do you think is the best way? Let's talk about this together." So, after that big meeting, we have ongoing meetings throughout the year. We have buy-in from the students because they are helping to [plan and] develop what is going to happen to them. You

know, you and I went to school and we would get to the end and think, "I hope she gives me a good grade, I hope I passed." But, we'd never know until the end. At least I didn't. This way, the students know every step of the way through self-evident assessment where they are, and you know where they are, and you know they know where they are. There is no surprise because they are *participating* in formative and summative assessments throughout the whole time. So, collective wisdom. You know, I have this old Atari computer brain from the 1970s, and they've got these super computer brains. Why would I think that my Atari brain can run an entire curriculum when these super power computer brains are sitting right there in front of me to leave me in the dust? No, I want to network with them. I want to get all that assistance, all that power.

Then, finally, compassion. Compassion is the thing that arises spontaneously. It doesn't have to be taught. It radiates from the teacher. If

the teacher really, really cares—really, really loves—and not is just putting on an act or something, it works. My old principal, John Broadman, used to say, "John, if you've got any problem at all, there is only one answer." And, I would ask, "How can there only be one answer? These are complex children, complex families." He would say again, "There is only one answer for every problem." I would say, "What is that, Mr. Broadman?" He would say, "The answer is, ask yourself what is best for that [particular] child? It's not what's best for you. It's not what's best for me. It's not what's best for the curriculum. It's what's best for that child." So, there is no cookie-cutter answer at all. He was right. Everything has to be child-focused. Individual child-focused. That takes more time, but it is what serves them best. That is what we are here for. We are servants, you know. We are here to serve people as best we can . . . so that's what we must do.

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