EAST HAMPTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

East Hampton, Connecticut

Superintendent's Update
Week of October 2, 2017

The vision of the East Hampton Public Schools: Preparing and inspiring our students to be innovative, responsible, contributing members of an ever-changing global society.

There is more information available to any student with a smart phone
than an entire empire would have had access to three thousand years ago.

~ Terry Heick,
in *"How 21 Century Learning is Just Different"* (Click to read)

This week in our Schools

Monday, October 2
A day of
kindness & caring
in the
East Hampton
Public Schools!

- **Monday, October 2 – A Day of Kindness and Caring: National STOMP OUT Bullying Day.** Kindness matters because it changes lives. Start by visiting: http://www.stompoutbullying.org/.

- **Monday, October 2 – Board of Education Policy Subcommittee in the High School Office Conference Room, 5:30 PM.**

Monday, October 2 – Board of Education Meeting in the High School T-Bell, 6:30 PM. At the Board of Education meeting on Monday, October 2 in the High School T-Bell at 6:30 PM, the Board will recognize our Friends of Education for 2017! Please join us for this meeting and recognition. We will recognize the following: John Acari – Memorial School; Lynn Minnick – Center School; Nancy Oakley – Center School and Middle School; Holly White – Middle School; Sean Cox – Middle School and District-wide; Mark Vickery – High School; Sylvia DeMore – High School; Paul Herlihy – High School; Tania Sones – District-wide; and Donna Finkelstein – District-wide.

- **Tuesday, October 3 – High School Music Boosters in the High School T-Bell, 6:30 PM.**

- **Wednesday, October 4 – Elementary PTO Meeting at the Center School, 6:00 PM.**

- **Wednesday, October 4 – High School Project Graduation Meeting in the High School Library, 6:30 PM.**

- **Thursday, October 5 – Kindergarten Ice Cream Social in the Memorial School Cafeteria, 6:30-7:30 PM.**

Friday, October 6 – Coffee and Chat with the Superintendent at the High School Cafeteria Patio, 7:30-9:00 AM. There is no school due to Professional Development, but you are welcome to enjoy coffee on the High School Cafeteria Patio with the Superintendent. Let the kids sleep in and grab coffee to start your day.

- **Friday, October 6 – NO SCHOOL. Professional Development Day.**

7:30-8:30 AM	**Breakfast,** High School Cafeteria
8:30-11:00 AM	**(All Teachers) Legal Updates: Special Education & 504 Legal Responsibilities for Certified Staff,** presented by Mark Sommaruga Pullman and Comley Law Firm
11:00-Noon	**Lunch**
Noon-3:00 PM	**Building specific professional learning activities**

- **Monday, October 9 – NO SCHOOL. Columbus Day.**

October / November Calendar

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
1	**2** **National STOMP OUT Bullying Day** Policy Subcommittee High School, 5:30 PM **Board of Education Meeting - EHHS T-Bell, 6:30 PM** Friends of Education Night!	**3** **High School Music Boosters** High School T-Bell 6:30 PM	**4** **Elementary PTO Center School 6:00 PM** Project Graduation High School Library 6:30 PM	**5** **Kindergarten Ice Cream Social** Memorial School Cafe 6:30-7:30 PM	**6** **Coffee & Chat With the Superintendent** High School Cafeteria 7:30-9:00 AM **Professional Development No School**	**7**
8	**9** **Columbus Day No School** National Fire Prevention Week → National School Lunch Week →	**10**	**11** PSAT Day **High School Sophomores & Juniors** **Middle School PTO Middle School Library 6:00 PM** FILM: Chasing the Dragon The Life of an Opiate Addict 7:00-9:00 PM Epoch Arts Suitable fro Grade 8 - Adults	**12**	**13**	**14** **Relay for Life EHHS participation (Over 80 students!)**
15	**16** East Hampton Principals Appreciation Day (National Boss's Day) Stand Up for Others Week → National School Bus Safety Week → **Board of Education Meeting - EHHS T-Bell, 6:30 PM**	**17**	**18**	**19** Grade 4 to Mystic	**20** Grade 4 to Mystic **Project Graduation Fundraiser** "Messing with Your Mind" with Chris Mansfield Family-friendly Fundraiser East Hampton Hgih School 7:00 PM Adults $10 / Students $5	**21**
22	**23** MEET THE CANDIDATES **Board of Education High School T-Bell 6:00-7:15 PM**	**24**	**25** **Delayed Start for High School TWO HOUR DELAY for NEASC** Grade 6 & 7 Band/Choir to Coast Guard Academy	**26** **Superintendent's Advisory Council** 94 Main St. 9:00-10:15 AM Grade 5 to Pequot Museum	**27** **Coffee & Chat With the Superintendent** 94 Main St. 7:30-9:00 AM High School Semi-Formal	**28** **Cheetah Palooza! Memorial School** 11:00 AM-2:00 PM National Chocolate Day!
29	**30**	**31** Grade 6 Halloween Dance	**November 1** **Elementary PTO Memorial School 6:00 PM** Project Graduation High School Library 6:00 PM	**2** **Teacher of the Year Reception at LEARN/Old Lyme 4:00 PM.** Area teachers honored.	**3** **Coffee & Chat With the Superintendent** 94 Main St. 7:30-9:00 AM	**4** cHaNge yOur cLoCk *Daylight Saving Time ends on Sunday!*

Notes

■ *Great early turnout for the support of the United Way!*

Thank you for your support of the United Way! **The East Hampton Public Schools are having a very strong showing this year. As of this date, we have already surpassed last year's donation total!** And, given that Kevin Reich is the chair of the Middlesex United Way campaign, East Hampton Public Schools are looking strong and proud, with time still available for a donation.

Please consider a one-time donation or a payroll deduction donation (over 16 pays beginning October 20). If you need donation forms, simply contact Linda Collins lcollins@easthamptonct.org.

Thank you for supporting our local cause – The United Way!

■ *This is an important event for our community – for every community.*

On Wednesday evening, October 11, Epoch Arts (27 Skinner Street) will show the film "Chasing the Dragon – The Life of an Opiate Addict" followed by presentations and conversation. The evening is scheduled to take place from 7:00-9:00 PM. All teachers, parents, and students (Grade 8 and older) are urged to attend.

Opiate addiction is a national, state-wide, and **local problem.** Take the time to learn more about the problem and hear from a local family that was impacted directly by the crisis.

■ *From 2013 - Charlotte Danielson describes good teaching. Are we there yet?*

I like looking back every now and then on an article that caught my attention years ago to see if we have made progress. Here's a quick snippet from an article with a link to the whole interview in which Charlotte Danielson discusses teaching. Below are her comments on effective teaching in the era of the Common Core. It's still very relevant four years later!

When I walk into a classroom, of course I care about what the teacher is doing, but in some ways I care even more about what the students are doing. What's the nature of the task? Are students being invited, or even required, to think? Naturally, that has implications for what the teacher is doing and what the teacher has already done. That is, has the teacher designed learning experiences for kids that engage them in thinking or formulating and testing hypothesizes or challenging one another respectfully or developing an understanding of a concept? You really only know what a teacher is doing when you look at what the students are doing. I also listen carefully to how teachers question students—if they ask kids to explain their thinking, for instance. That's very different from just saying that's the right or wrong answer. It's a very different mindset about wanting to understand the students' thinking and their degree and level of understanding.

Interested in the whole interview? Click here.

If you have an opportunity to speak to students for 10 minutes this week, review the following article with them. It's worth a quick discussion. If you don't have time for a discussion, at least read the article and re-direct student thinking whenever you see a "thought hole" in action.

Best quote from the article: "the subconscious mind can absorb **20 million bits of information** through the five senses in a mere second. By intelligent design, data is filtered down so that the conscious mind focuses on **only 7 to 40 bits.** This is a mental shortcut."

It's these shortcuts that cause our students problems. Their reality comes from a "tiny sliver" of information. Help them see how their inaccurate perception can lead to problems if they don't look beyond the shortcuts.

Filling in Thought Holes: An Invaluable Social & Emotional Learning Lesson by Renee Jain *Eductopia.org*

"I didn't get invited to Craig's party . . . I'm such a loser."

"I missed the bus . . . nothing ever goes my way."

"My math teacher wants to see me . . . I must be in trouble."

These are the thoughts of a high school student named Jeremy. You wouldn't know it from his thoughts, but Jeremy is actually pretty popular and gets decent grades. Unfortunately, in the face of adversity, Jeremy makes a common error; he falls into "thought holes." Thought holes, or cognitive distortions, are skewed perceptions of reality. They are negative interpretations of a situation based on poor assumptions. For Jeremy, thought holes cause intense emotional distress.

Although all kids blow things out of proportion or jump to conclusions at times, distorting reality is not innocuous. Studies show that thought holes can provoke self-defeating ideas (i.e., "I'm a loser") that trigger self-defeating emotions (i.e., pain, anxiety, malaise) that, in turn, cause self-defeating actions (i.e., acting out, skipping school). Left unchecked, inaccurate thoughts can also lead to more severe conditions, such as depression.

Fortunately, with a brief social and emotional learning lesson, we can teach students how to fill in their thought holes and view the world in a more accurate light. The lesson begins with an understanding of what causes distortions of reality.

We Create Our Own (Often Distorted) Reality

One person walks down a busy street and notices graffiti on the wall, dirt on the pavement and a couple fighting. Another person walks down the same street and notices a refreshing breeze, an ice cream cart and a smile from a stranger. We each absorb select scenes in our environment through which we interpret a situation. In essence, we create our own reality by that to which we give attention.

Why don't we just interpret situations based on all of the information? It's not possible; there are simply too many stimuli to process. In fact, the subconscious mind can absorb 20 million bits of information through the five senses in a mere second. By intelligent design, data is filtered down so that the conscious mind focuses on only 7 to 40 bits. This is a mental shortcut.

Shortcuts keep us sane by preventing sensory overload. Shortcuts help us judge situations quickly. Shortcuts also, however, leave us vulnerable to errors in perception. Because we perceive reality based on a tiny sliver of information, if that information is unbalanced (e.g., ignores the positive and focuses on the negative), we are left with a skewed perception of reality, or a thought hole.

Eight Common Thought Holes

Not only are we susceptible to errors in thinking, but we also tend to make the same errors over and over again. The next part of the lesson outlines these common thought holes; this familiarity makes it easier for students to identify and avoid distortions in the future.

Seminal work by psychologist Aaron Beck, often referred to as the father of cognitive therapy, and his former student, David Burns, uncovered several common thought holes as seen below.

Jumping to conclusions: judging a situation based on assumptions as opposed to definitive facts

Mental filtering: paying attention to the negative details in a situation while ignoring the positive

Magnifying: magnifying negative aspects in a situation

Minimizing: minimizing positive aspects in a situation

Personalizing: assuming the blame for problems even when you are not primarily responsible

Externalizing: pushing the blame for problems onto others even when you are primarily responsible

Overgeneralizing: concluding that one bad incident will lead to a repeated pattern of defeat

Emotional reasoning: assuming your negative emotions translate into reality, or confusing feelings with facts

Filling in Thought Holes with the 3Cs

Once students understand why one falls into thought holes and that several common ones exist, they are ready to start filling them in! When faced with adversity, students can evaluate thoughts using the 3Cs:

Check for common thought holes

Collect evidence to paint an accurate picture

Challenge the original thoughts

Let's run through the 3Cs using Jeremy as an example. Jeremy was recently asked by his math teacher to chat after class. He immediately thought, "I must be in trouble," and began to feel distressed. Using the 3Cs, Jeremy should first *check* to see if he had fallen into one of the common thought holes. Based on the list above, it seems he jumped to a conclusion.

Jeremy's next step is to *collect* as much data or evidence as possible to create a more accurate picture of the situation. His evidence may look something like the following statements: "I've always received good grades in math class." "Teachers sometimes ask you to chat after class when something is wrong." "I've never been in trouble before." "The math teacher has always been kind to me." "The math teacher didn't seem upset when he asked me to chat."

With all the evidence at hand, Jeremy can now *challenge* his original thought. The best (and most entertaining) way to do this is for Jeremy to have a debate with himself. On one side is the Jeremy who believes he is in big trouble with his math teacher; on the other side is the Jeremy who believes that nothing is really wrong. On paper or mentally, Jeremy could use the evidence he collected to duke it out with himself! In the end, this type of disputation increases accurate thinking and improves emotional wellbeing.

In this lesson, students learn that thoughts, even distorted ones, affect their emotional wellbeing. They learn that accurate thinking is a tool to redress or avoid thought holes. Above all, they learn that one can choose which thoughts to focus on, and in this, there is power. As the pioneering psychologist and philosopher, William James, once said, "The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to **choose** one thought over another.

🟩 *Coming soon!*

Meet the Candidates for Board of Education
Monday, October 23
East Hampton High School T-Bell
6:00 - 7:15 PM

MEET THE CANDIDATES

Questions by students from East Hampton Center School
Moderator: Mr. Jonathan Baine, Center School Teacher

Be an informed voter at the polls on November 7!

Save the date and get to know the candidates for the East Hampton Board of Education: **Amanda Amtmanis (D); Lori Caldwell (D); Jeffrey Carlson (D); Christopher Goff (D); Lois Villa (D); Marc Lambert (R); and Mary Ann Dostaler (C).**

Childcare will be provided!

Thoughts

Get the spider web going in your classroom.

This is a quick read, but in this book you'll learn how to turn your classroom into a real community. The goal is to "build students into stronger communicators, more empathetic teammates, better problem solvers, and more independent learners." Just the skills we want them to have to be ready for college and careers.

The author makes it look easy with instructions that indicate you really only need a simple rubric, paper, and pencil to get going!

If you are intrigued email me and I'll give you copy of the book!
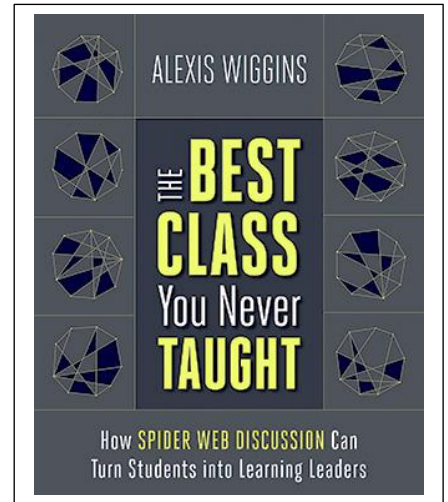
Best Class You Never Taught by Alexis Wiggins, published by ASCD

Chapter 1. Why We Need Spider Webbers

Karen graduated first in her class from Yale and went on to get her MBA from Harvard Business School. She was given the chance to publish some of her research while at Harvard, which led to an offer to head a multinational bank's institute on leadership. She packed her bags and moved halfway across the world to oversee the leadership branch of the bank's corporate offices. Part of her job was to travel the region to conduct interviews and surveys with industry leaders to learn and understand the hallmarks of leadership and to determine some of the personal and professional challenges keeping talented leaders, especially women, from top leadership tracks. In addition to this work, she was tasked with recruiting and hiring the best and brightest candidates for research and development work—keeping in mind that the best candidates on paper may not have key interpersonal skills.

Karen realized quickly that applicants' résumés were not helpful in determining who would be the best hires. She had a host of candidates from topnotch business schools to choose from, but many applicants lacked the sophisticated, nuanced communication skills needed in corporate leadership. She began to look for only two things in potential hires: excellent written and oral communication skills. Karen felt that new hires could learn the business of banking on the job, but the skills of asking good questions, listening, and communicating were invaluable to her team and she did not have the resources to teach these skills. The company needed employees who had honed their communication and social skills; the rest of their résumé was just window dressing.

Consider the following four excerpts from articles in the news media between the years 2013–2015, and see if you can spot the common thread:

> *Being able to read the room is such a crucial skill, adds Phunware sales executive Mike Snavely, that he's willing to hire people who don't know much about technology if they have a gift for relating to other people.*

> *What we care about is … do you step back and stop leading, do you let someone else? Because what's critical to be an effective leader in this environment is you have to be willing to relinquish power.*

> *You no longer have that strict hierarchical culture in the cockpit, where the captain was king and everyone blindly followed his orders. It's team oriented nowadays.*

> *Young people have not been well prepared for adult life today unless they are comfortable and well practiced in addressing collaboratively the kinds of problems and objectives that 21st century life poses.*

These articles range in focus from hiring in the technology sector to aviation safety to education research, but they all highlight one key point: today's jobs demand effective collaboration. Today's most competitive jobs go to candidates who can both lead and listen, innovate and question, see the big picture as well as the small details.

Are we doing this? Not that well. Unfortunately, we in education are prone to thinking that simply imposing a new structure or method will produce positive results. Those of us working in K–12 settings know this story well: in an effort to improve learning, many schools or districts decide to promote a new initiative, such as Socratic seminar, the Workshop Model, or an iPad for every student, and offer some initial training and follow up with a handful of meetings. But that is usually it. We seldom perform action research to test whether our initiative is effective at improving student learning. We rarely offer tiered, multifaceted, well-designed professional development to support the teaching faculty and administrators in how best to carry out the initiative over time. And, sadly, most of us have experienced the institutional

cynicism that comes with the "flavor-of-the-year" initiatives that surge at the beginning of every new school year and fizzle over time. We've also experienced the deflation that happens when the leaders championing new initiatives move on without structures in place to ensure continued success.

Spider Web Discussion does not aim to be a quick fix. It isn't about introducing a new, trendy structure in your classroom. It's not meant to be a box that is simply ticked on a supervisor's observation checklist.

Spider Web Discussion is a classroom philosophy, not a one-off activity. It's a culture. It's about understanding that learning is a complex process that plays out over time, through allowing students to grapple with challenging questions, ideas, and people. The process of Spider Web Discussion trains students to work together collaboratively in solving problems and to self-assess that process. The result is deep, high-level inquiry led and assessed by the students themselves, whether they are in 2nd grade social studies or high school geometry. Teachers using Spider Web Discussion aim to create authentic collaborators, communicators, and self-evaluators through ongoing, sustained discussion and assessment.

I have been using or training other teachers to use Spider Web Discussion in classrooms for more than 10 years and I believe it is the single most powerful tool in my teaching toolbox. When I read the four excerpts (p. 4), I'm struck by how well Spider Web Discussion achieves each of the valued skills and abilities cited. In my experience, it goes further than those crucial skills; if done right, it instills a magical feeling in the classroom, one where students feel safe and excited to share their deepest intellectual questions and ideas, where students realize they are on the same team, working toward a common goal, no longer competing for airtime or top grades. This awareness produces a sense of community and an ethical space in which true inquiry becomes possible.

Think of the aviation example: flight safety is better now due to the collaborative process. All who fly benefit from the fact that the industry now values collaboration over traditional power structures—and the stakes are pretty high when you are talking about plane safety. Systems thinking has evolved; today's employees must be prepared to value each other's input, seek varied voices, consider multiple perspectives, and "relinquish power," as noted by Bock, a Google executive. We should be giving these practices top billing in our classroom—not merely as structures, but as cultures and practices that are taught, learned, and assessed on a regular basis.

Why do we need Spider Webbers? Precisely for the reasons cited in the news excerpts. We owe it to our students to train them in—not just superficially expose them to—how to collaborate successfully. This is *the* vital skill for the future.

And while Spider Web Discussion teaches complex skills like teamwork, empathy, citing evidence, and self-assessment, the method is simple. You only need a rubric, a pencil, and some paper to get started.

A Brief History of Spider Web Discussion

The Origins of Harkness Method

In my mid-20s, I found myself teaching high school English at The Masters School, in New York's Hudson Valley. The Masters School was different from the other schools I had taught in; it was a Harkness school, which is a school that uses Socratic seminar discussion in its classrooms. I was daunted by the new-to-me notion that students were meant to run their own discussions.

The history of the Harkness method can be traced to one of America's preeminent New England prep schools, Philips Exeter Academy. In 1930, a wealthy donor named Edward Harkness gave the school a generous gift with the stipulation that it be used to promote a new style of classroom instruction. He wrote: "What I have in mind is [a classroom] where [students] could sit around a table with a teacher who would talk with them and instruct them by a sort of tutorial or conference method, where [each student] would feel encouraged to speak up. This would be a real revolution in methods" ("The Harkness Gift"). What developed from this idea were oval tables around which all students and the teacher were seated equally, able to see each other's eyes, fostering discussion.

At the Masters School, the oval table tradition lived on; every classroom, even science and math classrooms, had large oval tables in the center of the room, around which students debated, discussed, and problem solved (science rooms were purpose-built with labs in the back and oval tables in the front).

But the table is not the point; schools do not need a specific table to foster discussion. The purpose of the Harkness method is to actively engage students in their learning process through the exchange of ideas and group problem solving.

For the first time in my career, _I was asked to shift my role from fount of knowledge to facilitator_. The challenge posed to me for the first time as an educator was entirely novel to me: how could I get the students _themselves_ to uncover the most pertinent, key understandings in the content we studied with as little hand-holding from me as possible?

I began by using a rubric that a colleague shared with me, which flipped much of the conventional approach to class participation on its head. The rubric required students to engage in fairly standard practices during discussion, such as listening and being respectful, referring to the text to support their point, and avoiding interrupting others. One interesting element is that it asked for (more or less) equal participation during discussion, meaning the shy kids would need to make an effort to speak up and the chatty kids would need to make an effort to allow others some space to do so. The real kicker, though, was listed at the bottom of the rubric: "Because this is a team effort, there will be a team grade. **The whole class will get the SAME grade.**"

This was truly different. In all the years I spent as a student and a teacher, the participation grade was always about 10 percent of the students' overall grade, and it was always an individual grade. A group grade, the thinking went, was unfair because it meant that someone else's behavior could bring your grade down (or up).

But I quickly realized the power of the group grade, which I'll talk about more explicitly in Chapter 6. At the beginning of the year, when I introduced the rubric and the group grade, there was an immediate understanding that they were in it together, working as a team. The grade did not seem unfair because they were not being graded on their individual understanding of the text, but their ability to work together. They were being assessed on how well they approached the text critically as a team, building on each other's ideas and pushing each other to new and better understandings. **Once the goals of _collaborative inquiry and teamwork_ were clear to the students, the assessment design seemed logical to them.** However, I don't recommend counting the group grade in students' overall GPAs. I think the most powerful use of the group grade is through symbolic grades that are reported and shared with students and parents through the grade book or reporting systems—but not counted. That is, the group grade is most effective when it is used formatively and weighted 0 percent in overall GPA. See Chapter 6, which is devoted to the assessment strategy, for more information. I believe firmly that using a group grade is the secret to Spider Web Discussion's success. Why? Because we may ask students to work in groups monthly, weekly, or even daily, but unless we provide specific grading or feedback on that process, how do we know if they are learning to be effective collaborators?

I had never considered those questions until working at a Harkness school, but suddenly my mind was bursting with ideas and observations about the process. I began to let go of my instinct to control the class discussion. I listened more and spoke less. Eventually, I began to stay silent during the majority of Harkness discussion time.

I realized then that, for many years before, I had spoon-fed students with the key content, concepts, and questions. I may as well have written on the board every day in class, "Here Is What Is Important in the Text" and added my notes underneath.

Now, however, being in the environment where I was asked to take a step back and empower the students, I realized that students are adept at identifying what is important. It didn't take me long to see that they got much more out of the discussions when they were doing the heavy lifting. It was a humbling surprise and, ultimately, a pleasure to realize I wasn't as important to the process of learning as I believed I was.

From Harkness Method to Spider Web Discussion

In the years since working at The Masters School, I have honed this method into something more detailed and systematic with regard to process, assessment, and self-evaluation. To better reflect the purpose and differentiate it from Harkness discussion or Socratic seminar, I named this specific method of discussion Spider Web Discussion; think of it as Harkness 2.0.

In most high schools, Socratic seminar (or Harkness method) is still driven by the teacher. Although students are doing the discussing, the teacher is still the referee and master of knowledge, offering up the right question at the right moment, redirecting the conversation, correcting misunderstandings, ensuring that students are civil, and grading the participation. In Spider Web Discussion, the teacher is largely silent. When Spider Web Discussion is taking place in my classroom, I sit in the back, away from the students, and avoid eye contact with them. I have a blank notepad on which I take notes about their discussion.

Who is asking the right question at the right moment, redirecting the conversation, correcting misunderstandings, and ensuring that students are being civil to one another? The students are. That's their job, and I train them over several months to do it. By the middle of the year, they do it very well. I take great pleasure in seeing how irrelevant I become in the classroom about three months into our Spider Web Discussion routine—the students themselves are far better referees and masters of knowledge than we usually give them credit for (or even allow them to be).

The name, Spider Web Discussion, is an acronym that describes all the components of the method:

- **S**ynergetic—it's team oriented, balanced, and group graded (the whole class gets a single grade for each discussion).
- **P**racticed—it's ongoing, rehearsed, and debriefed. It's not a one-time activity but a process, much like writing.
- **I**ndependent—the teacher interferes as little as possible; students run the discussion and self-assess.
- **D**eveloped—the discussion gets deep, builds on itself, goes "somewhere."
- **E**xploration—this is the main goal; more than discussion, it is a discussion-based exploration (of a text, an Essential Question, or a topic)
- with a
- **R**ubric—this is the cornerstone to the whole process: to have a clear, concise rubric against which students can easily self-assess.

The "Web" part of the name comes from the web-like graph that a student or I draw to document the discussion in real time and then we use to debrief.

Spider Web Discussion captures the essence of what the technique aims to do: create graduates who are skilled collaborators, listeners, problem solvers, power relinquishers, and leaders.

What the Research Says

Interpersonal skills are more in demand, yet our education system has not quite caught up. We still largely design our classrooms and lessons—especially in high school and college—for acquisition of academic content instead of "soft" skills. A 2015 study by an associate professor of education and economics at Harvard University highlights how, since 1980, jobs requiring social skills have grown more than other types of jobs. Especially booming are those occupations that require technical skills coupled with interpersonal skills, such as when doctors or computer scientists work on group projects. The job sectors with the greatest decline were those related to repetitive manual labor, like garbage collection, or individual analytical tasks, such as engineering. Jobs requiring social skills, regardless of the sector, grew 24 percent over the time period the study examined (Deming, 2015).

Our schools need more effective ways to teach social skills, so we can produce graduates truly prepared for their future careers. In 2009, Google began to examine the reasons why people left their company to work elsewhere, and found that one of the biggest factors was having a terrible boss. Google asked itself how it could crunch the numbers relating to who was a good boss and who was a bad boss at an unorthodox tech company. Project Oxygen was born, an initiative that used thousands of performance reviews, feedback surveys, and employee award nominations to distill data points to a list of eight key characteristics in the best managers at the company. Google called this list The Big Eight, and the traits are ranked in order of importance:

1. Be a good coach.
2. Empower your team and don't micromanage.
3. Express interest in team members' success and personal well-being.
4. Don't be a sissy*: be productive and results-oriented.
5. Be a good communicator and listen to your team.
6. Help your employees with career development.
7. Have a clear vision and strategy for the team.
8. Have key technical skills so you can help advise the team.
   *Sissy is a term used in The Big Eight Google list.

The Project Oxygen team noted that "what employees valued most were even-keeled bosses who made time for one-on-one meetings, who helped people puzzle through problems by asking questions, not dictating answers, and who took an interest in employees' lives and careers" (Bryant, 2011, BU1). Most fascinating to note is that numbers 1, 2, 3, and 5 all

relate to collaborative work or communication. Last on the list is "technical skills." The idea that knowing how to empower a group of people you are leading is more important than your content recall is counterintuitive to how most of us were taught, but it makes perfect sense. In a company like Google, collaboration is how everything is designed, created, and implemented.

Furthermore, Google identified some pitfalls of the company's worst managers, which related to having a lack of management, communication, or collaboration skills. ==Essentially, if you don't know how to work well within a group, it's highly unlikely you will be successful at your job.== In the end, Google was able to use self-generated data on managers to improve business.

A few key lessons are found in the story of Google's Project Oxygen. First, collaborative and communicative skills are paramount, surpassing even technical skills. Second, the lack of those collaborative and communicative skills leads to real losses in human capital in the workplace, an unnecessary loss of talent. Third, feedback is key to the process of leadership; the organization needs employee feedback on the manager's performance followed by specific, goal-oriented feedback on areas for improvement. ==Basically, Google offers a glimpse into what the real world wants: collaborative, communicative, goal-oriented employees who are familiar with the process of giving and receiving feedback.==

It sounds perfectly logically and relatively doable from an education perspective: ==we want to produce graduates from high schools and universities who are good collaborators, communicators, and feedback givers and receivers. But if these are the skills we want for our graduates, the key question is this one: what are we doing *daily* in our classrooms to teach, encourage, and assess these skills?==

==We might say that we encourage our students to work in groups all the time, but are we giving them feedback on how well they are working in those groups? Are we assessing the quality of their collaboration? The frequency with which they seek it? How well they communicate with each other?==

When we examine the issue more carefully, we see that few of our classes are set up to really teach, encourage, and—most important—assess these skills. If we want students that collaborate well, isn't it logical that we need to teach and assess the skill of collaboration (the teamwork itself) and not just the product (the content or presentation)?

If you are using Common Core State Standards (CCSS), you may have noted that the standards for English-Language Arts are skills-based and not content-based. There is no required list of content, but there are skills standards for college and career readiness, such as "prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively" (CCSS, 2010). The beauty of Spider Web Discussion is that it perfectly supports students in attempting to reach that standard at the same time it supports the aims of the businesses mentioned.

==The research on the importance of teaching interpersonal skills is clear: we need to design our schools backward from the goal of creating students well versed in collaboration, listening, problem solving, and empathy.== I have found that Spider Web Discussion accomplishes this without investing in extensive training or technology. In Chapter 2, I'll introduce the method in detail and explain how to start your first day of Spider Web Discussion in the classroom.

Practical Considerations

Before you begin Spider Web Discussion, it's important to take into account the kind of school, district, and community you work in. Will there be support and enthusiasm from your supervisors? Parents? Students? If you find that the answer is "yes" to those questions, then it will be easy to begin Spider Web Discussion.

If you are not working in ideal conditions, study the lay of the land and make adjustments. At the Masters School in Dobbs Ferry, New York, I was working in a Harkness school, where teachers, parents, and students were all familiar and comfortable with student-led discussions and the assessment of it. When I moved to an international school in Qatar, strict policies required me to teach and assess in lockstep with my colleagues. In that case, I continued using Spider Web Discussion in my classes, but I no longer reported the grades in the grade book. They became symbolic, unreported grades that were discussed with the students. When I moved to yet another school, there was a policy in that school's academic handbook that prohibited group grades for group work. The policy was written to avoid the perennial problem wherein one student does all the work and several other students get the grade without lifting a finger. When I explained that the premise of Spider Web Discussion is different, that it actually grades the process of working together itself, assessing the nature of collaboration and teamwork through a critical inquiry, the principal agreed it was a unique use of group grading.

He allowed me to go ahead with the assessment, as long as I informed parents at the beginning of the year. I did that using the course syllabus. During these early years, I advocated for counting the group grades, even slightly. More recently, I believe that using the group grade as a "doesn't count, weighted zero" formative feedback mechanism is more in sync with practices that include grading to standards and avoiding unfair group-grading scenarios. If you explain to students, parents, and administrators that the purpose of the group grade is feedback toward specific goals related to collaboration, speaking, and listening, and that the grade doesn't affect individual GPAs because it is weighted 0 percent, you shouldn't have too much difficulty implementing the method where you work.

Doing a little research on the school policies and getting the appropriate permission from supervisors will help to ensure you don't encounter the unfortunate situation of trying and seeing success with the method, only later to discover that your district restricts it. You should also consider whether your school has a reporting mechanism or grade book that allows for 0 percent weighted grades. If it does, you can enter the group grades for students and parents to track progress, yet keep those grades from affecting individual students' grades. If your school doesn't or can't report in this manner, then you can use the grades in the classroom symbolically, talking about them openly and keeping a record on a chart or clipboard, but not reporting the grades officially.

Another key is your student population. The vast majority of students are thrilled to find they have a valued voice. They feel worthy and trusted when we educators give them the opportunity to take ownership of their learning through a method like Spider Web Discussion. It is always a joy when I observe the first Spider Web Discussion of a school year and students' faces light up with pleasure and engagement because they are allowed to discuss freely and feel intellectually valued by their peers and the teacher.

But there can be resistance, especially with students who are more comfortable being spoon-fed the right answers by the expert teacher. Introducing the method needs to be done more deliberately in these kinds of settings. See Chapters 4 and 5 for more information on troubleshooting different students' personalities in the context of Spider Web Discussion. The next chapter will help you introduce the method in your classes step-by-step and you'll learn exactly what to do and expect on day 1.

Voices from the Field

—***Professor Eric Mazur, Dean of Applied Physics, Harvard University***—Many K–12 teachers make the mistake of thinking that colleges want students who have memorized a lot of information or internalized a lot of content, that what high school graduates most need to be prepared to do is listen to lectures, take notes, and perform well on traditional tests.

As a current professor of physics, I can tell you this is utterly false. We don't need good note takers—we need students who can hold ideas up to the light and challenge, question, test, and hypothesize about them. We need leaders who can ask deep questions and leaders who can also sit back and listen, learning from others. Science depends on this process. Physicists, chemists, and biologists work together, not individually in isolation. Scientists consult all the resources and people on hand when they are trying to problem solve; they don't rely on their memory the way we require students to in traditional test-taking. If we truly want to prepare K–12 students for college and career success, we must take the focus off content recall and assessment practices that are outdated, testing only lower-order recall or computation skills (after all, smartphones have these skills!). I used to have very traditional, lecture-based, test-based courses. Over the years, I realized the top performers could not accurately answer conceptual, application questions. There was a disconnect between their high grades and their true understanding of the material.

Now, my courses look very different. They are built around group problem solving, inquiry, and discussion. Not only is class more interesting for the students now, the research also shows that they actually learn more and better this way. Their understanding is way up, their depth of thinking far greater.

Big Takeaway

Today's jobs demand more than content acquisition. Both higher education and the professional world want high school graduates that have excellent critical thinking, communication, and people skills. Karen, the business leader described in the opening vignette, is based on the sentiments of a friend. She was open to hiring inexperienced interns who had

excellent communication skills because they were more valuable to her workplace than an experienced insider with average or poor communication and social skills.

Spider Web Discussions are just one way to help students improve communication and social skills, but the method works in all kinds of classrooms. Spider Web Discussion is a philosophical approach that can change your classroom and prepare your students for the challenges of the real world.

Ready to read more? E-mail me and I'll give you a copy of the book! - Paul

How many kind things did you say last week?

Paul K. Smith

26 Miles of Hope