

EDgility - 35 minutes

Paul Magnuson
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Now *that* was something.

Seventeen students and six adults for 35 minutes just created an atmosphere that truly hummed. I'd like to toot the collective horns of the 23 people who were there and the many more who helped us get there.

Two paragraphs of background:

At the end of some school days, across grades 7 to 12, we have a period called homeroom. Each teacher supervises a group of students who treat the time more or less as a study hall. However, teachers can request that any student in the school come to their homeroom for additional help, and students can request to meet with any of their teachers for additional help.

In the middle school, grades 7 and 8, we modified this set up just a little bit. All middle school students and their teachers start homeroom together where, depending on current coursework and student and staff interests, a combination of teacher and student directed activity is planned (or not) and carried out.

Now about that learning buzz I still feel in my bones ...

Students filter into a room that has three couches, two armchairs, five smaller tables with chairs and a large table with two chess sets. There are 3D printers against one wall, closets of makerspace material, posters from math class on the wall, and a couple of large rolling white boards. There are books and model *Tour d'Eiffels*.

Tutors from the grade 9 and 10 school arrive with the middle school students and I pair them up. Clara and Marcos go with Aina and Noel for math tutoring. Tom, their math teacher, goes with them to get them started. Vasiliina will read in English with Alvaro, Kera is doing French conversation with Taisiia and Daria. They go off to find quieter classrooms. Jyldyz sits down with Vera for an informal lesson in Russian. It is Vera's first (slightly) formal lesson. She has been learning with other students on her own and will pick up in a few weeks time the nickname Vianka due to her new-found interest in Russian.

The science teacher has set up Simone in the science classroom next door with part of an assignment to redo for a better grade. She works alone. DeLona and Joan, our English teachers, meet in Joan's room down the hall to collaboratively plan.



We've had juggling balls out for the last week or so. A few students practice, while three huddled around the chess boards. One student is doing Buzz Math exercises on line, sitting in the arm chair, while another works on his touch typing skills, also online. Every time he passes a level he emails the certificate to me and calls, from across the room, "This is so addicting!"

Between the emailed certificates and watching the chess and juggling out of the corner of my eye, I am conferencing with students individually on behavior grades they assigned themselves for the last four weeks. I ask them to compare their own ratings with the ratings of their teachers. It gives me a chance to do a lot of high fives and lay on some well-deserved praise. It also gives me a chance, with a couple students, to reinforce our expectations for them in the middle school.

Nic, the physical education teacher, tells me later that she was learning French on Duolingo. She's sitting smack dab in the middle of the action, on her computer. The activity swirls around her. Several of our students and staff use Duolingo from time to time.

It's a combination of teacher-directed and self-organized learning, louder than a typical classroom, and music to my ears.

The 35 minutes runs out and students leave for their afternoon activities. We teachers look at each other in the sudden quiet. I'm thinking what just happened is brilliant. I'm hoping they do, too.

What made those 35 minutes possible?

A goal in the middle school is to create these types of spaces as we are comfortable with them and as long as they support this type of loosely structured learning buzz. Taking a minute to consider what created it - and what can support it - is worth a half page or so ...

The space. We have a large room connected by glass doors to an office / conference room, with a variety of furniture and work spaces. We originally created the space for a coding hotspot, telling ourselves we were making a space that might look more like a Google office than a classroom. I don't know if it looks like a Google office, but it isn't your regular classroom. It's an activity space.

Multiple adults. There were three of us actively working with students and three more of us either following up from a class or preparing for the next day. Given our 18 students, it's an understatement to write that this is an unusually low teacher-to-student ratio. The availability of numerous teachers is definitely contributes to and helps sustain our environment. We are teaching the soft skills of collaboration, respect, sharing, and compromising by modeling those skills. We are connecting one-to-one with students.



Peer tutors. It was our second day of peer tutoring. Some of our most able students from the ninth and tenth grades sat down with our seventh and eighth grade students. Peer role models who are not teachers, and not adults (as obvious as that is) make for a different atmosphere.

Assessment philosophy. Students are able to redo any past assignment to improve their academic grades. Teachers are actually required to address anything that falls below what in a traditional system they might call a C. Those students working on math were actually re-working their math. There is fairly immediate payback for working with a peer tutor, or a teacher, or each other, because grades are not one-time fixed events, but indicators students can revisit and improve.

The behavior grades (which are separate grades not figured together with the academic grades) provided the reason for individual conferences. All students not already working individually with a teacher or peer tutor met individually with me. In other words, all students got individual attention sometime during the hour, due in part to the assessment philosophy.

I almost didn't mention that there are no grades for this 35 minutes. No rubric, no test, no ... assessment. Just this short reflection I'm writing here.

Self-organization. Teachers gave some students specific tasks and we chose, for the most part, who received a peer tutor. But a majority of the 35 minutes was self-organized. No one told the teachers who needed one-on-one time. (Or another way to say the same thing: student work indicated specific needs and the assessment philosophy provided motivation.) No one told the teachers to work with students or to collaborate with other teachers. The teachers did what made sense to them as teachers and colleagues.

And no one told the students who didn't have a specific task what task they had to do. Juggling and chess happened because students decided juggling and chess should happen, just like online typing and math tutorials happened, because students decided they should happen. No one needs to remind us that autonomy and self selection significantly bolster motivation. That the joy of learning might be dampened by the adult overlay of assessment and rewards.

Ultimately our goal is not to hurry our students through as much content as we can. Our goal is to create individuals capable of accepting and giving assistance, groups capable of working together, learners able to make good choice about what to learn, how to learn, when to learn ... We want our students to experience the very real buzz one gets, yes, the high one gets, physically and emotionally, when learning and motivation are real.

We lived it for 35 minutes. Now let's hope, and provide the affordances, for another 35 minutes. And another, and another.

