Creating a Creative Classroom

A Case Study in Best Core Teaching Practices from Mile High Youth Corps YouthBuild’s Lead Instructor
Nikki Sorola

With 50% of program time in DOL YouthBuild spent in academics and two major academic improvement benchmarks set as part of the program’s expected performance outcomes: 1) to increase one Educational Functioning Level in either Literacy or Numeracy; and 2) to achieve either a GED, a high school diploma, or a recognized construction industry certification, young people who enter DOL YouthBuild have a tremendous amount of secondary school ground to cover in a very short 6-12 month period.

As a significant number of these youth have left the traditional school system as early as the end of the elementary school grades, they come in to YouthBuild with a significant literacy and numeracy disadvantage. Turned off by traditional classrooms and teaching methodologies, YouthBuild students need a creative classroom that involves them as an essential part of the equation—that focuses on creating a successful teacher and learner interaction, meaning that the classroom becomes a community where the youth and the staff relate to each other as both teachers and learners all the time.

YouthBuild USA recently had the opportunity to talk with Nikki Sorola, Educator at Mile High Youth Corps YouthBuild (MHYCYB) about her best core teaching practices to share with the field of YouthBuild sites. Nikki joined MHYCYB after teaching 10th grade high school for three years in Tohatchi, New Mexico, part of the Gallup-McKinley County public school system. Several years ago, MHYCYB experienced turnover of instructors in a GED classroom where the instruction was driven primarily by using Steck-Vaughn workbooks. MHYCYB was looking to take the classroom to the next step of academic engagement for both youth and staff. The wanted to stop the merry-go-round of teacher turnover and student burnout from rote education experiences created from drill and kill workbook instruction.

When asked to comment on this traditional approach to achieving the GED and increasing literacy and numeracy, Nikki said that from her experience, “that sort of independent work all the time is challenging and only works for visual learners.”

“Students need authentic lessons, active participation in group discussions, and opportunities to complete group projects—this (hands on approach) helps youth who learn in different ways.”

As a teacher, she wanted an **engaging classroom**. For her teaching degree, Nikki went to Northern Michigan University, and participated in their teacher training program where she received her BS in Secondary Education and English. The key in her own learning experience was that her teachers there
“focused on a student centered classroom vs. teacher centered classroom, and we did a lot of practice with differentiation and different learning styles.”

The New Mexico school system offered her freedom as a teacher to try what she wanted in her classes and she found a key best practice was to connect lesson content and learning to what was happening in the outside world, and even more particularly, in the students’ world. She connected strongly to different media including film, TV, and music and integrated current multimedia to the assigned literature, reading, and math. Model activities and projects to come out of her classroom included designing a TV station, determining who the station’s audience would be, designing the sort of programming aimed at that audience, and writing parts of a show. Approximately 90% of her classroom youth were Navajo, and so she used Sherman Alexie and other Native American authors as the central reading for those classes. Further, she experimented with citation and speaking skills with music; they read the play Antigone in groups and designed a modern day movie adaptation of that and worked to convince a fictional studio to take on their project.

Prior to coming to MHYCYB, Nikki had never taught math. But she had always been good at Math naturally. While she says she has less tricks for Math, she has found that two resources help her tremendously: 1) the site www.mathalicious.com because it applies specific math skills, such as mastering the Pythagorean Theorem, to real-world questions and situations, and provides lessons and supporting resources for teachers; and 2) Manipulatives including tape measures and objects, like simply dried beans, for grouping when learning fractions or percents.

A primary challenge Nikki faced coming into the GED program was breaking or at least limiting the traditional cycle of isolating youth to work on workbook pages independently. Nikki decided she wanted whole group lessons so there could be real interactions between all the youth. She used the GED textbook for basic content and question formatting, but centered a large part of her teaching practice around her short story work from her teaching experience in the New Mexico school system and started focusing on students’ writing skills by consistently introducing opportunities to write essays.

She names some other major challenges in YouthBuild classrooms: 1) Different kinds of learners (not just visual); 2) different levels of learners; 3) short time limit to teach and learn in; and 4) high staff turnover. “It’s an awful lot of ground to cover to be ready for the GED in nine months.”

Both the youth and teachers need to practice different habits as the youth come into the program with low self confidence. “They have to battle their “high school demons,” the habits that students recognize may have contributed to them dropping out or being unsuccessful in schools in the first place.”
For the teacher:

The main thing a teacher has to do before anything else: “create relationships with the students. Both students and teachers need to feel safe to make mistakes.”

1) Small class size is essential—18 or less youth in a classroom, so that it is easier for an instructor to work closely with each student to identify their skill gaps (14-1 is a YouthBuild performance design standard).

2) Try to be laid back, but also not be too laid back. You have to make the time to talk with the students. Make eye contact with the students when you talk to them and be sure to greet them at the beginning of every day.

3) Try to stay current with music, TV, movies, Internet—these are things that students are interested in.

4) Try not to have a lot of ego around things—it’s okay to be funny.

5) Have a supportive environment with other YouthBuild staff. Nikki has a strong leadership with Eliska, her YouthBuild Director. Staff benefit from staff development opportunities and learning together. The Director screens for and hires staff that will work well together which is key to stopping staff turnover.

6) Have a weekly staff meeting and create time for report outs on what’s happening where, i.e. Case Manager on Post Secondary Education, Job Developer on placements and follow-up so they all develop and share curriculum together.

7) Each staff does mentor meetings. Each staff has a youth he or she is a key advocate for—4 to 6 youth per staff member.

For the Physical Environment:

1) Have windows, large, tables, brightly painted walls, posters that reflect different populations in the class, quotes. Make it a dynamic, living place and change the landscape frequently as current events and interests change.

2) No cell phone out during class or on construction—only during break. Plan for frequent breaks every hour or hour and a half—so staff is very up front with their policies on phone usage, i.e. if youth’s phone is out, he/she will turn it in to staff, if that is no good for the youth, this is not the program for him/her. There are also educators making effective use of smart phones and tablets and technology as regular parts of the instructional day. In these instances, the technology is leveraged as a teaching tool to develop and reinforce skills and competencies. The technology is not used only for the sake of using the technology itself.
3) **Have a separate computer lab from the classroom.** Nikki’s practice is not to have laptops constantly present in the students’ working spaces. Other programs may utilize smart phones and laptops to a greater degree. She likes having a projector and computer set up in the classroom. She does have mounted projector and computer to show Powerpoints and go to the Internet. Computer lab has all computers against the walls of the rooms so as the teacher, she can see what everyone is on on the Internet at the same time.

4) **Each quarter addresses a different theme in addition to the GED.** There is a multimedia closing assignment to turn in. Further, teachers and students pick books and organizing into book groups. One quarter would be designed around fiction, the next quarter designed around non-fiction.

5) **Students are bought in to going to college and understand that in jobs, you need to read, write email, advocate for yourself, and analyze reading for work.** Nikki picks reading that will be interesting to the youth and their future placement choice.

6) **Design the classroom as a place where students are really willing to help each other out and be mutually cooperative.**

7) **Make assignments relevant to the youth:** As a teacher, you need to focus on problem solving with the youth. Stay current with what is going on out there in the world that connects with your youth: movies music, news, sports. Try matching music to things going on in a book to show mood and shift in events, why things happen as they do (great example assignment Nikki has used).

Nikki’s final advice for her peers in the YouthBuild field: you need to look at teaching as creating art. It takes time to create something that works for you and the youth, so you need to take the time to make sure it is both.