

“MOONSHOT MONDAYS”

An exciting and doable first step to the future

By Marc Prensky

To be published in *Educational Technology*, July-Aug 2016

“The key to building trust is to actually trust the students.”

– Esther Wojcicki, teacher, Palo Alto High School

Esther Wojcicki, who has taught English and journalism for 31 years at Palo Alto High School in California (“Paly”), is perhaps the most successful high school teacher I have ever met. Her students’ publications consistently win top journalism awards. Her former students revere her, and show up frequently to visit and praise her.

Despite the fact that her school sits in Silicon Valley across from Stanford University, about half its students do not come from privileged backgrounds, but from far less-affluent East Palo Alto. But all students do well in Esther’s classes. Why? Because Esther empowers them. As perhaps her most famous student, the actor James Franco, who comes back frequently, puts it “She showed me I could take my dreams as seriously as I wanted.” What is truly amazing about Esther is how little she appears to do in the classroom—and how much her students achieve and accomplish.

Today, one might look at the building Esther works in with five other teachers and the 600 students in her program—a brand new, state-of-the-art 25,000 square foot facility known as Paly’s “Media Arts Center”—and think “of course she can achieve results there.” But that new facility came only at the very end of Esther’s teaching career—and as a result of her success. For most of her years at Paly, Esther taught in what is known as a “temporary”—i.e. one large, dank room in what I would call a “Quonset hut.” When Esther taught there, that room was stuffed to the brim with up to

80 students at a time, plus all the many newspapers and magazines those students read and produced. There is no better evidence that it is the teacher and the methodology that makes for good education – not just the facilities.

Esther was an early adopter of Macintosh computers, and today all her students have Macs or Chromebooks. She is also a long time promoter of both Google Docs and Creative Commons resources. (She is, in fact, Vice Chair of Creative Commons.) But she has concerns about how technology is used in today's education. "Today, technology too often just gives teachers and parents a more effective way of controlling the kids" she says, "and that leads to disempowering the students. Instead, technology should liberate students to explore topics of their own interest."

So if it's not just the technology, what's the real secret to Esther's success? The quest Esther is now on, in her final teaching years, is sharing her approach so that others can use it. Last year she published a book called ***Moonshots in Education*** (2015). The book's goal is to tell teachers and administrators nationwide and worldwide about the power of giving kids control in the classroom and testing them with trust and respect. Esther defines a "moonshot" in education as "an attempt to do something that is hard and seemingly unachievable, but can still happen if we all (parents, teachers, and leaders around the world) work together toward a common goal." She sees the objective of moonshots as leaving "passive education" for "active learning," where kids become educated through doing and experience.

Esther has distilled the "secret sauce" of her methodology into an acronym, which she developed with the help of her students (whom she consults about everything she does). The acronym is **T.R.I.C.K.** which stands for **trust, respect, independence, collaboration** and **kindness**. The key to her success with students, Esther believes, is continually maintaining those elements of trust, respect, independence, collaboration and kindness, while putting kids, rather than the teacher, in control in the classroom. Doing that is what enables her teaching—which is really a form of coaching and empowering—to work.

Figuring out how to do what she does was not easy—even for Esther—as it goes against all of today's "spoon-feeding" approach to education. "I took the riskier route," she writes. "I tossed the book and waited to be fired. [In the end] no one noticed, except the kids, who were happy." "It wasn't easy being a maverick," she writes, "but I did it because it worked. The kids were happy, and they learned and wanted to be there."

Here are some more things Esther has said:

"I realized early that the more a teacher does from the student and the more control the teacher has over that student, the less creativity and innovation evolve and the less

genuine and learning happens.” “My program’s philosophy [today] is the same as when I started with the Macintosh computers: students are collaborators the teacher is a coach or advisor.” “My goal is to help teachers work less, be more effective, and empower kids.”

Since many teachers feel it is hard to try a different kind of teaching—even when they believe it is the right approach for the kids—Esther advocates teachers employ a “toe in the water” approach to changing their practice. It is based on the approach Google uses with its employees—i.e. doing things differently one day a week. “All classes in all areas of the curriculum,” she writes, “should have a project that relates to the real world. I advocate for 20% time for all classes — that is give students 20% of class time to work on a project with real world implications. Such subjects must relate to the real world. Tell the students and let them apply the skills they learn in class to the world around them.”

Esther originally recommended calling this 20 percent time, where kids could work one day every week on their own projects, “Moonshot Fridays,” choosing Fridays because she assumed that students would like having this alternative to look forward to all week. But when she spoke of it with her students, she found, to her surprise, that the students far preferred to *begin* the week working on their own projects — giving them more incentive to want to return to school after the weekend. So now Esther promotes “Moonshot Mondays.”

To find out more about these, there are numerous videos online where Esther speaks, in her own words, about them and her work (see moonshotsEDU.com and elsewhere). Anyone who is interested in moving kids’ education into the future should take the trouble to listen to this amazing and transformative teacher.

*Marc Prensky is an internationally acclaimed speaker and author in the field of education. He is currently the founder and Executive Director of the Global Future Education Foundation and Institute, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating a new and better world education for kids in the third millennium. Marc has authored six books and over 100 essays, and has spoken in 40 countries. His writings have been translated into 11 languages. Marc’s last book was **The World Needs a New Curriculum**. His newest book **Education to Better Their World**, will be published in September 2016 by Teachers College Press. Marc’s writings and speaking schedule can be found at www.marcprensky.com. Contact Marc at marcprensky@gmail.com.*