Understanding Your Beliefs About Teaching:
Developing A Language For Powerful Conversations And Meaningful Change

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Abstract: *We face such an unprecedented array of challenges and demands, each described and portrayed in a variety of ways, no wonder the eyes glaze during the all-too-common drive-by workshop. This paper and the tool it introduces presents both a conversation you can have internally about your teaching and a professional exchange with others about issues that matter without being defensive. We can cut through the confusing language and articulate why we do and what we do in order to give meaning to what is asked of us by policy-makers at all levels, school administrators, grade chairs, parents, and others in school communities. Meaning-making not "training" allows us to make conscious decisions to benefit our learning and that of our students.*

Keywords: Pedagogy, Teaching Development, Curricula

Why the search for meaning?

"Implementation is changing practice.... the process of altering existing practice in order to achieve more effectively certain desired learning outcomes for students." (Fullan & Park,

1981, p. 6). The term "implementation" is often replaced by "change", "innovation", "revision", and "reform" with characteristics such as the following:

- Implementation is multidimensional in that it may involve changes in the materials one uses, the methods one uses or the beliefs that one holds.
- These aspects of change are hypothetically directed towards some educational goal.
- Limiting implementation to a change in materials will unlikely bring about the kind or amount of student learning desired.
- Implementation is a process not an event.
- Any innovation will get adapted, further developed and modified during use.
- Implementation is a process of professional development and growth- both a highly personal and social experience.
- Implementation is a process of clarification.
- One hundred percent implementation is probably not desirable, and in any case is impossible.
- The success of change is dependent solely on what people do and are prepared to do (Fullan & Park, 1981, pp. 6-10, 24-26).

I cite the early work by Fullan and Park because more than 25 years later we face the same issues. For example, Fullan (2007), in his fourth edition of his now classic book on the topic argues that meaning changes with the times, that it is always "new". He also notes (2008) how challenging it is to change our beliefs about teaching: at the heart of why we do what we do. I keep these challenges in mind as a teacher educator when I work with teacher candidates and veteran teachers as we try to make sense of what is expected of us in schools. In addition, a synthesis of studies on teaching and learning in both K-12 and college classrooms argues that personal meaning making is important in learning anything (Darling Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Donavan & Bransford, 2005; Weiman, 2007).

How do we go beyond superficial change and get at teacher practice to enhance student learning? Going deeper means revealing the beliefs behind such practice: beliefs determining in large measure 'what people do and are prepared to do'. Or are we still victims in "drive-by workshops" using the cardiac method: "WE believe it in our hearts so YOU do it." (Green & Myers, 1990, p. 332).

Examining Our Own Beliefs

Much of the implementation literature as well as research on learning in general stresses the importance of meaning (e.g., Bussis, Chittenden,, and Amarel, 1976; Fullan, 1982, 2007, 2008; Fullan, Anderson & Newton, 1986; Leithwood, 1986; Perrone, 1991; Yero, 2002; Darling Hammond and Bransford, 2005; Donavan and Bransford, 2005; Weiman, 2007). In order to make changes (or to decide not to make changes) in teaching in response to a curriculum document or district policy, we must understand what is to be implemented that is different from what we do now. To modify curriculum effectively, we must relate those necessary changes to what we already do and know. The quality of our understandings influences in large measure what we do in the classroom.

As it turns out beliefs trump facts when it comes to using the findings of research in

education into policy as well (Levin, 2008). This view can be tested reading the pages ion any media outlet.

So how do we get beyond the argument culture of blame and actually engage in more powerful and productive conversations about important issues in our schools and classrooms?

One vital direction is to examine our own practice. As Maxine Greene states:

> "Teaching is purposeful action . . . [the teacher's] intentions will inevitably be affected by the assumptions he makes regarding human nature and human possibility. Many of these assumptions are hidden. Most have never been activated. If he is to achieve clarity and full consciousness, the teacher must attempt to make such assumptions explicit; for only then can they be examined, analyzed and understood." (1973, pp. 69-70).

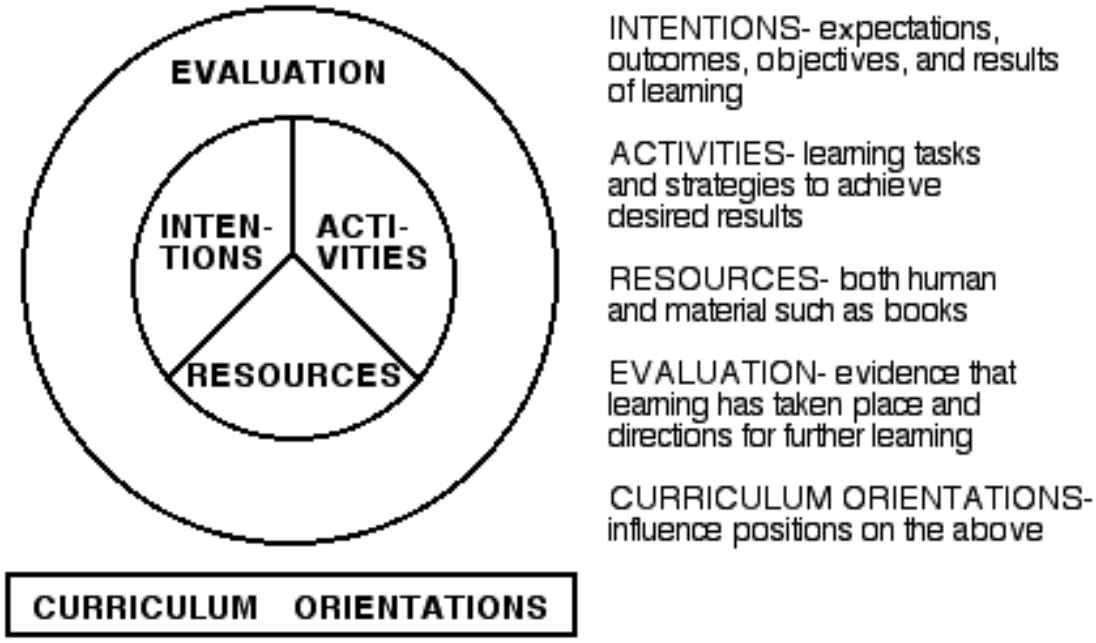
Parker Palmer takes this into current classrooms: "When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life—and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well." (1998, p. 2).

Such a process goes beyond attending a workshop, being briefed on some new policy or reading the latest research. It involves looking at our beliefs about education, the learning process and the discipline or disciplines that we teach. We need to examine our practice in order to improve it. Sometimes, such examination results in changing what we now do in order to meet new circumstances. At other times, reflecting on our practice confirms our faith in those aspects of teaching we know and can demonstrate to be effective. Teachers, like doctors, engineers or other professionals, cannot afford to sit on their laurels[1]. Socrates put it well when he declared: "The unexamined life is not worth living.".

Busy as we are, how can we reflect on our beliefs and practice in meaningful ways rather than go through the motions or get defensive because we are doing the "wrong" thing?

Clarifying Change: The Language of Curriculum Orientations

An educational orientation (sometimes called an approach, position, lens, or perspective provides a framework for approaching curriculum: "a basic stance in teaching that is rooted in a world view" (Miller, 2010, p. 15). Tyler (1949) used the terms "philosophical and psychological screens" to describe this source for developing curricular objectives. Orientations can be categorized in a number of ways (e.g., Eisner & Vallance, 1974; Aoki, 1980; Miller, 1983; Brandt, 1988). How an educational orientation can act as a philosophical screen can be viewed in the context of a teacher's individual program for his or her students. According to Werner (1987, personal communication), we can view program as in the diagram below:



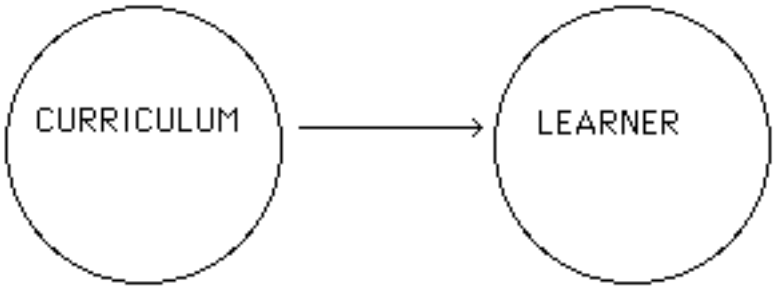
Thus, implementation is shaped from a particular perspective or orientation. How people implement educational innovations depends on how they view them. Miller and Seller have reclassified Miller's 1983 perspectives into three broad orientations (Miller & Seller, 1985). Each of these orientations holds a particular set of views regarding such aspects of education as the following:

- Aims of the curriculum
- Learning experiences
- Role of the teacher
- Evaluation
- Viewing the whole child vs viewing the child as a student
- Teacher centered vs child centered
- Personal vs public knowledge
- Process vs content
- Intrinsic vs extrinsic motivation
- Holistic vs molecular learning
- View of child as unique vs view of children sharing characteristics (from Berlak & Berlak, 1981; Miller, 1983).

Drawing from this work, researchers based at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (Leithwood, 1986) have argued that in order for a curriculum to be effectively implemented, there must be a match between the orientation presented by a particular guideline and the educational orientation of those responsible for teaching from it. If we apply a mechanistic view of human behavior to curriculum planning in order to teach specific facts or skills (a transmission orientation), we may have difficulty implementing a curriculum which sees students as active learners capable of intelligent problem-solving (a transaction orientation).

This conception of orientations has certain advantages over others. It represents more than two positions, thus resistiung the temptation to dichotomize issues. A second feature is the relative clarity of the terms used.

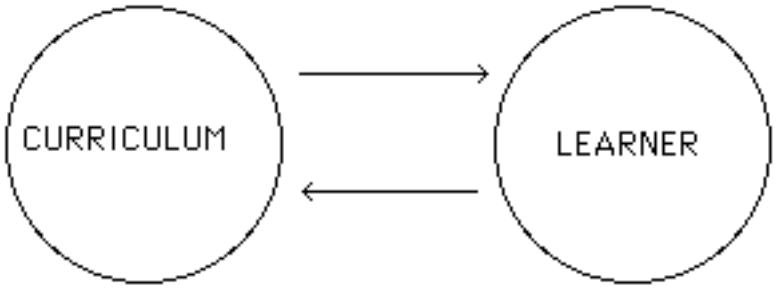
Transmission[2]



As the name suggests, the aim of this orientation is to transmit knowledge to students in the form of facts, skills and values. This position has been regarded as the "traditional" one concentrating on rote learning methods and the breaking down of curriculum into small components to be logically analyzed. Such educational ideas as mastery learning, behavioral psychology
and "cultural literacy" can be associated with this orientation as can the support of standardized tests and reading programs based on phonics.

For some learning outcomes, teaching from this orientation has had impressive results. While transmission can be argued for on the grounds of efficiency and preciseness and that these features have made for a "manageable" curriculum, this orientation may not match well how most people learn or the best teaching for some complex learning goals (Donavan and Bransford, *op. cit.*; Weiman, *op. cit.*).

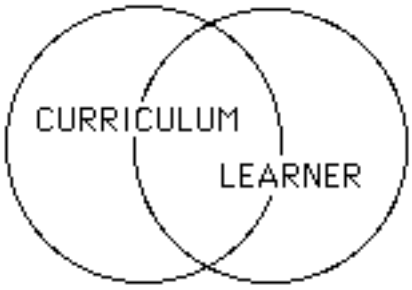
Transaction



This orientation views education as a dialogue between the student and the curriculum with the student as a problem-solver. Problem-solving techniques, the theories of Vygotsky, Piaget, Kohlberg and Bruner, scientific inquiry, and the use of interviews and rubrics in assessment can be associated with this orientation. Teaching from a transaction orientation may be viewed as a "conversation" in which teachers and students learn together through a process of negotiation with the curriculum to develop a shared view of the world (Arlin, 1986; Vermette, 2009). Constructivism may be to transaction as behaviourism is to transmission.

This orientation may correspond more closely to how students actually think and learn. Yet critics of transaction have pointed to what they view as an over-reliance on logic and a downplaying of intuition and creative thinking. Advocates of a transmission orientation also note that for some of these transactional approaches to work students need a basic foundation of content and skill to the relevant subject discipline (Willignham, 2009).

Transformation



This position stresses personal and social change in which the person is interrelated with the environment rather than have control over it. The aim is self-actualization, personal or organizational change. Transcendentalism, humanism and social change are at the heart of this orientation. The work of John Holt, Michael Apple, Paolo Freire and the alternative schools movement can be associated with this orientation. Concepts influenced by this orientation include mainstreaming, the whole student, holistic learning, integration of subject matter, creative writing, inclusion, service learning, and social justice. Interests and teaching to promote multiple intelligences as well as the social and emotional development of students reflect this oriientation.

While transformation may move us closer to a world in which the needs of all are respected, this orientation has not developed a coherent body of thought to the extent seen in the other orientations.

While a person from a transmission orientation might buy a mousetrap and use it as instructed, a person from a transaction orientation would work to develop alternatives to the trap. A person from a transformation orientation might question why one would want to bother catching a mouse in the first place? Responding to the question "What time is it?" a person might give one of the following answers depending on his or her orientation:

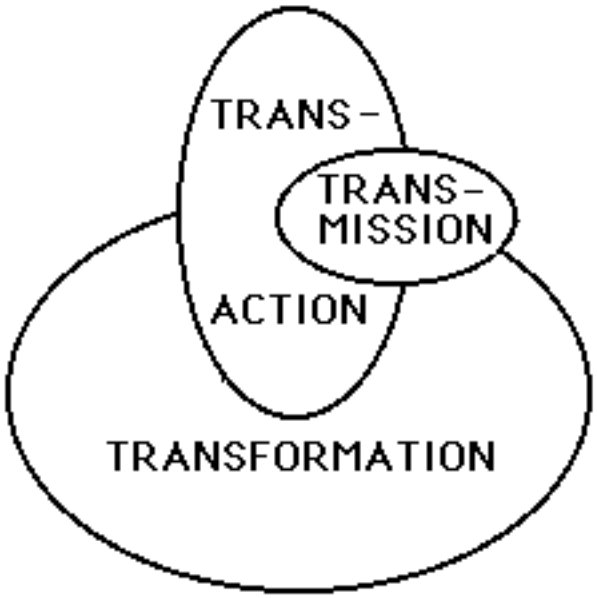
- Transmission- "It's 10.30 a.m."
- Transaction- "What time do you think it is?"
- Transformation- "What time do you want it to be?"

To be serious, despite the descriptions above, one should not jump to conclusions. Most teachers and educational programs work from a combination of orientations, although one orientation may be stressed more than others. The orientations are in a sense inclusive. A transactional program applies cognitive skills to basic content, the acquisition of which is usually identified as part of a transmission orientation. Curricula aiming at personal or social change often attempts to provide students with the required knowledge and skills in order to achieve these ends.

Yet it would be a mistake to conclude that the orientations are strictly hierarchical. Transaction is not "better" than transmission. There is a place in schools for all orientations, although teachers may operate too often from a transmission mode, especially in an era of standards framed by testing. We can favour one orientation as our "defaulty" *modus operandi*,

but be open to shift when appropriate with the learning goal, needs of students, and the desired learning outcomes.

The following is one way to connect the orientations (Miller, 2010, p. 44).



Thus, we support the goals of differntiated instruction and strive to achieve them with some degree of comfort. This small step towards open and fair-mindedness can increase our capacity for professional growth.

Curriculum Orientations and Implementation

To refer again to Fullan and Park:

> "The ultimate goal of implementation is not to implement X or Y particular innovation, but to develop the "capacity" for systems, individuals, and schools to process all innovations and revisions.... Implementation of any specific innovation will probably get easier as that basic capacity gets established." (1981, p. 26).

The concept of curriculum orientations can help to develop that capacity for change by making clear the nature of the changes needed to implement a curriculum guideline as well as a provincial, state, or school board policy and promote the powerful conversations that go beyond the pundits and politicians.

Turning to Michael Fullan once again (1982) he asks. if "effective implementation involves the development of individual and organizational meaning vis-a-vis a particular change", [it is the task of the consultant, or other designated change agent], to "facilitate the development of that meaning" (p. 188).

How do we share conversations that result in shared meaning? As a school district consultant in the midst of tensions around a new set of provincial guidelines I applied my learning from a year in another province to develop an approach to help the teachers I worked

with make sense of what was being asked and to see where the real gaps were instead of expending energy on illusory gaps created by a misunderstanding of the new language used in curriculum policy and practice. The use of a curriculum orientations inventory proved to be a useful tool for this purpose.

A Curriculum Orientations Inventory

Teachers are busy people. Their world involves hundreds of conscious and unconscious decisions about what to do next in a classroom. Such decisions are made in every class, every day. Such decisions are usually made alone, on the spot, and without the support of colleagues. Immersed in what it perceives to be the "practical", school culture tends to frown on the "expert". "Don't give me any of that theory stuff. Give me something I can use in my class tomorrow" is a common refrain.

The inventory is offered as a tool for getting teachers to reflect on their practice. The inventory does not tell you what a person truly believes. Transmission teaching is currently "out of fashion" in some places and back with a vengeance in others. Teachers know this. Thus, like their students they know what the "wrong" answer is.

A useful language for professional dialogue can serve to reduce or at least manage the political and ideological wars that so often divide the education community into angry camps. If we bring our hidden values to the surface in wasy that are respectful, professional, and subject to evidence, we can have powerful conversations and meaningful change.

The inventory can do the following:

- It gets teachers talking about their beliefs without much jargon.
- Such discussion can readily focus on the gap between a teacher, subject department or school staff's orientation to curriculum and the orientation of a curriculum guideline, board or ministry policy. For example, recent changes in Ontario History and Social Studies curriculum may be greater in the areas of assessment and evaluation procedures than in the actual curriculum content itself. We can check this assumption using the inventory.
- The items can be completed in less than 20 minutes.
- The Miller and Seller conceptualization of curriculum orientations, having fewer categories than other schemes, is comprehensible by teacher-practitioners. Nevertheless by being more than two categories may lessen the temptation to falsely dichotomize issues in schooling
- The items are organized around categories familiar to teachers.
- The items as in this sample are generic. They are not meant to be specific to a particular subject. Although subject-specific inventories can be designed, a generic inventory can be used by a staff to deal with aspects of a total school program.
- A subject-specific inventory can be designed to look at curriculum changes to see what we already do, what we could do, and look for ways to meet new demands if they are in fact as new as promoted.

With these purposes in mind, the following inventory is offered for general use in taking a first step in helping us help ourselves by being consciously reflective practitioners. This tool

also offers a language and a means for discussing serious issues in teaching and learning. This inventory has proven to be a powerful conversation starter that cuts through the language that is thrown at us to examine more meaningfully those underlying issues and values that we hold.

[1] A considerable and long-standing literature centring on the theme of a "reflective practitioner" exists; for example, see Schon, 1983, 1987; Hunt, 1987, Ross, 1987.
[2] These descriptions are adapted from Miller & Seller, 1985 & Leithwood, 1986. These references should be consulted for additional detail.

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Yero, J. L. (2002) *Teaching in mind: How teacher thinking shapes education.* Hamilton, MT: MindFlight Publishing.**SETTING EXPECTATIONS: WHAT STUDENTS SHOULD LEARN**

Rank the statements in each row- **1** for the statement you agree with most, **3** for the one you agree with least, and **2** for the remaining statement. Ties are NOT permitted. Put the numbers in the spaces provided.

Row 1 _____ Learning to work as a member of a team is a key learning goal.	**Row 1 _____** Schools should help students develop a sense of self worth.	**Row 1 _____** We should teach knowledge and skills considered essential by society.
Row 2 _____ A course should stress key knowledge, concepts, and skills in a subject discipline.	**Row 2 _____** Good courses stress themes integrating many disciplines.	**Row 2 _____** Curriculum should stress process and focus on developing critical thinking.
Row 3 _____ My course should primarily focus on content.	**Row 3 _____** I want to teach my students how to learn as well as what to learn.	**Row 3 _____** I want to make my course personally relevant to students.
Row 4 _____ Leaning outcomes and standards should connect to the abilities of the learner.	**Row 4 _____** Leaning outcomes and standards should be as specific as possible, best stated in behavioral terms.	**Row 4 _____** Students should have an important say to setting leaning outcomes and standards.
Row 5 _____ Schools should prepare students to understand the world in which they live.	**Row 5 _____** Students need to learn how best to participate as citizens in a democracy.	**Row 5 _____** Teachers should help students effect social, political, and /or economic change.

Instructions to Maximize Learning

Rank the statements in each row- **1** for the statement you agree with most, **3** for the one to agree with least, and **2** for the remaining statement. Ties are NOT permitted. Put the numbers in the spaces provided.

Row 1 _____ A good lecture presenting basic information is a key teaching strategy.	**Row 1 _____** Teachers must be facilitators to stimulate thinking and challenge perspectives.	**Row 1 _____** Classroom activities should be experiential and student centred.
Row 2 _____ A rich program should involve community resources and experiences.	**Row 2 _____** Instruction should begin at a student's current level of understanding	**Row 2 _____** Teachers should give strong direction if they want learning to occur.
Row 3 _____ Group work is important so that students can look at a problem or issue from a variety of perspectives.	**Row 3 _____** Group work can work in moderation but it can get in the way of real learning if overused.	**Row 3 _____** Group work is important so that students can take ownership in their learning.
Row 4 _____ Learning a skill is like playing golf. You must get used to the whole action. Otherwise, you just mess up.	**Row 4 _____** Skills are best taught by breaking them down into sub-skills in a logical sequence from simple to complex.	**Row 4 _____** Although skills may be broken down for purposes of analysis, it's the entire thinking process that counts.
Row 5 _____ Written work should be preceded by student discussion so that the nature of the inquiry is clear.	**Row 5 _____** A vital goal for written work is to prepare students for more formal writing in the next grade.	**Row 5 _____** Writing in class should be personal and creative.

ASSESSMENT & EVALUATION:
HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT THEY KNOW?

Rank the statements in each row- **1** for the statement you agree with most, **3** for the one to agree with least, and **2** for the remaining statement. Ties are NOT permitted. Put the numbers in the spaces provided.

Row 1 _____ The primary aim of evaluation is to determine student mastery of content and / or skills.	**Row 1 _____** Assessing growth in students' thoughtful behaviours (habits of mind) is vital for further learning.	**Row 1 _____** Evaluation should be varied so that the whole student is assessed.
Row 2 _____ Sound assessment includes student input, including self and peer assessment.	**Row 2 _____** Assessment should be based on specific criteria and standards that all students must attain.	**Row 2 _____** My assessment should consider the knowledge, skills, and habits of mind students bring to class.
Row 3 _____ Student should help in constructing rubrics for grading work.	**Row 3 _____** Teacher marking schemes as the best tools for grading.	**Row 3 _____** I think that looking at number or letter grades hinders real learning.
Row 4 _____ Satisfied students are clear evidence that learning is taking place.	**Row 4 _____** A lively class discussion is clear evidence that learning is taking place.	**Row 4 _____** Students attentively listening to the teacher prove that learning is taking place.
Row 5 _____ If you want to find out what students have learned, test them.	**Row 5 _____** If you want to find out what students have learned, ask them.	**Row 5 _____** Give students a real-life problem or task and watch them work at it to find out what they have learned.

VIEWS ABOUT OTHER TEACHING / LEARNING ASPECTS

Rank the statements in each row- **1** for the statement you agree with most, etc. Ties are NOT permitted. Put the numbers in the spaces provided.

Row 1 _____ I like hand-on PD so I can apply my learning to my work.	**Row 1 _____** I like PD sessions when I can discuss issues with my colleagues.	**Row 1 _____** Good professional development happens when I hear an engaging speaker.
Row 2 _____ My most important resource is a good textbook.	**Row 2 _____** I strive to use a wide variety of resources in my classes.	**Row 2 _____** I prefer students' own experiences and community resources for my classroom.
Row 3 _____ The internet is a place where people can wrestle with issues through collaboration.	**Row 3 _____** The internet is best used when students can surf for ideas that interest them.	**Row 3 _____** The internet is a great place for getting lesson ideas and information for upcoming topics.
Row 4 _____ Students should be primarily viewed as individuals.	**Row 4 _____** I treat my students as equals who can achieve the stated standards and learning goals.	**Row 4 _____** Differences among my students such as learning styles need to be considered in a sound program.
Row 5 _____ Schools should be seen as places where teachers and students work together to develop a shared meaning of the world.	**Row 5 _____** Schools should be inviting places In which students can work things out for themselves.	**Row 5 _____** Schools should be places where teachers teach students what they need to know.

Scoring

This is a two-step process.

Step 1. Transpose the numbers into the right cells on the charts below.

- E.g., If your order for Row 1 of the Expectations section was 1 3 2, that is what you put in the appropriate cells.

Step 2. Add up the numbers **according to category** and total as indicated.

- Add al "M" statements together, then "A", then "F".
- Your score for each section should be between 5 and 15.

Setting Expectations: What Student Should Learn

Row 1 A	**Row 1 F**	**Row 1 M**
Row 2 M	**Row 2 F**	**Row 2 A**
Row 3 M	**Row 3 A**	**Row 3 F**
Row 4 A	**Row 4 M**	**Row 4 F**
Row 5 M	**Row 5 A**	**Row 5 F**

Section Score : All numbers when totaled should add up 30

M statements=___ **A** statements= ___ **F** statements= ___

INSTRUCTION TO MAXIMIZE LEARNING

Row 1 M	**Row 1 A**	**Row 1 F**
Row 2 F	**Row 2 A**	**Row 2 M**
Row 3 A	**Row 3 M**	**Row 3 F**
Row 4 F	**Row 4 M**	**Row 4 A**
Row 5 A	**Row 5 M**	**Row 5 F**

Section Score : All numbers when totaled should add up 30 (AS BEFORE)

M statements=___ **A** statements= ___ **F** statements= ___

ASSESSMENT & EVALUATION: HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT THEY KNOW?

Row 1 M	**Row 1 A**	**Row 1 F**
Row 2 F	**Row 2 M**	**Row 2 A**
Row 3 A	**Row 3 M**	**Row 3 F**
Row 4 F	**Row 4 A**	**Row 4 M**
Row 5 M	**Row 5 F**	**Row 5 A**

M statements= ___ **A** statements= ___ **F** statements= ___

Views About Teaching

Row 1 F	**Row 1 A**	**Row 1 M**
Row 2 M	**Row 2 A**	**Row 2 F**
Row 3 A	**Row 3 F**	**Row 3 M**
Row 4 F	**Row 4 M**	**Row 4 A**
Row 5 A	**Row 5 F**	**Row 5 M**

Section Score : All numbers when totaled should add up 30

M statements=___ **A** statements= ___ **F** statements= ___

TOTAL SCORE (all numbers when totaled should add up to 120
M statements= A statements= F statements=

THE LOWER THE SCORE, THE MORE DOMINANT THE ORIENTATION.

Why do you think you scored as you did?