Connecting the Classroom, Community, and Curriculum

The work our students do must mean something to them; so, too, must this work prepare them for the demands of “that famous place: the world,” as Virginia Woolf called it (32). Whether this world be “flat” (Darling-Hammond; Friedman) or we are facing “a post-American world” characterized by the “rising of the rest” (Zakaria), or suffering a “global achievement gap” (Wagner), the eternal verities remain: death, taxes—and work. And this work, which can increasingly be done by others at the other end of a wire (Crawford), has become increasingly complex in its cognitive demands as Mike Rose reveals in his study of blue-collar and service occupations. All of which makes the stakes for our students—and the country—pretty high. In short, our students must develop the skills needed to do work that pays them well and contributes to the country’s overall success; they also need to be able to get that work by knowing how to apply for and get these good jobs that will support and challenge them as they pursue life, liberty, and happiness.

Coming from a working-class background, I have always respected the full spectrum of work and the intelligence it requires. The work my family did was not, however, work that required résumés and interviews. My grandmother worked at Walgreens as a cashier until she died. My father worked for 38 years in the printing business, which evolved so rapidly due to technology that it demanded he essentially never stop learning. Those who stopped learning lost their jobs. His father painted houses and hung wallpaper. His brother installed rugs for 30 years until his knees were so ruined from the rug stretcher he could not work any more. Another brother drove a delivery truck for a local bakery.

The hard work of these people (and those on my wife’s side, where they were mostly plumbers and masons) laid the foundation for the children in my family—siblings, cousins, nephews—to seek greater education, something not available to our parents, many of whom, including my father, dropped out of school to begin working. My wife’s father took advantage of the GI Bill to attend college and, eventually, law school. On my side, I was the first in my family to graduate from college, a trend that is now the norm in our families.

Introducing Generation Y to the Real World

Attending college is not, however, the norm for all the families of the students I teach, especially many of the Latino/Latina students in my classes. College is the great dream of so many in our country, but the sort of work our students do when they enter the adult world is really determined by the advanced skills and literacies they actually develop. And the boundary between school and the “real world” is one I think about constantly as the father of two boys who are at that age, and as the teacher of more than 100 seniors, many of whom fall into the category of “dabblers,” “dreamers,” and the “disengaged,” rather than the “purposeful,” to borrow terms from William Damon’s important study of youth purpose.

The dramatic changes in the landscape of work are alarming to adults; our students too often assume everything will just work out, that they will be ready when the time comes. Figure 1 offers us a glimpse into the future of work in our country.
FIGURE 1. Bureau of Labor and Statistics "Fastest Growing Occupations" Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Title/Description</th>
<th>% Growth</th>
<th>Source of Training or Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biomedical engineers</td>
<td>72.02</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Network systems and data communications analysts</td>
<td>53.36</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home health aides</td>
<td>50.01</td>
<td>Short-term on-the-job training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal and home care aides</td>
<td>45.99</td>
<td>Short-term on-the-job training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial examiners</td>
<td>41.16</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical scientists, except epidemiologists</td>
<td>40.36</td>
<td>Doctoral degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physician assistants</td>
<td>38.99</td>
<td>Master's degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skin care specialists</td>
<td>37.86</td>
<td>Postsecondary vocational award</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biochemists and biophysicists</td>
<td>37.42</td>
<td>Doctoral degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic trainers</td>
<td>36.95</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical therapist aides</td>
<td>36.29</td>
<td>Short-term on-the-job training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dental hygienists</td>
<td>36.14</td>
<td>Associate degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterinary technologists and technicians</td>
<td>35.77</td>
<td>Associate degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dental assistants</td>
<td>35.75</td>
<td>Moderate-term on-the-job training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer software engineers, applications</td>
<td>34.01</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical assistants</td>
<td>33.9</td>
<td>Moderate-term on-the-job training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical therapist assistants</td>
<td>33.28</td>
<td>Associate degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterinarians</td>
<td>32.95</td>
<td>First professional degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-enrichment education teachers</td>
<td>32.05</td>
<td>Work experience in a related occupation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compliance officers, except agriculture, construction, health and safety, and transportation</td>
<td>31.05</td>
<td>Long-term on-the-job training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational therapist aides</td>
<td>30.74</td>
<td>Short-term on-the-job training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental engineers</td>
<td>30.62</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharmacy technicians</td>
<td>30.57</td>
<td>Moderate-term on-the-job training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer software engineers, systems software</td>
<td>30.44</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey researchers</td>
<td>30.36</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical therapists</td>
<td>30.27</td>
<td>Master's degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal financial advisors</td>
<td>30.13</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental engineering technicians</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>Associate degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational therapist assistants</td>
<td>29.78</td>
<td>Associate degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitness trainers and aerobics instructors</td>
<td>29.41</td>
<td>Postsecondary vocational award</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several important observations immediately come to mind: these are nearly all jobs traditionally held by women; the jobs typically held by men are being replaced by those that require more social and communication skills, not to mention the ability to do more with a computer than surf the net and use it to play World of Warcraft; and, finally, students must possess the academic essentials (Burke, School Smarts) required to apply for, get, and keep these jobs, all of which require technical training, post-secondary education, and ongoing formal learning as these fields and their associated technology continue to evolve.

Thus the skills needed differ from those of the past and from the work that many, though certainly not all, of my students’ parents do. Linda Darling-Hammond identifies the following “survival skills for the new economy”:

- Design, evaluate, and manage one’s own work so that it continually improves
- Frame, investigate, and solve problems using a range of tools and resources
- Collaborate strategically with others
- Communicate effectively in many forms
- Find, analyze, and use information for many purposes
- Develop new products and ideas (2)

Implied within Darling-Hammond’s list is a skill-set that Tony Wagner singles out and puts first in his own “survival skills [for] the New World of Work”: critical thinking and problem solving, which he immediately reframes as “the ability to ask good questions” (14).

The Résumé as a Reality Check

My questions were not only how to best prepare my seniors to meet the demands of that world but also how to bring that world into our classroom for a more immediate and profound encounter that might cause some lasting change. Sometimes we need to be the educational equivalent of the Zen master who whacks the pupil on the forehead with his stick to aid in the process of awakening! This seemed all the more apt given that this was a first-period senior class that constantly gave me quizzical looks when I asked them to do anything resembling work. “Didn’t you get the memo?” their raised eyebrows and wrinkled foreheads seemed to ask.

How then to achieve such an awakening without the stick, without the whack? How to transform the traditional lessons about writing résumés and business letters into meaningful encounters with both themselves and the world outside our classroom? What follows is the story of a two-week period in my college prep Senior English class during which we did work that nearly all students said had some of the greatest impact on them the whole year. It was an experience that nearly all 35 students said really woke them up, that gave them a sense of accomplishment, and, in short, seemed relevant and important to them.

The Résumé as Both Record and Story

As part of a larger study of work, during which we read a wide range of nonfiction, I set out to teach a good unit about résumés, something each senior should graduate having written and being able to show a prospective employer. My tendency is to ask at all times when planning a lesson: What else does this lesson allow me to teach? It seems nearly all English lessons resemble those Russian dolls that have a series of smaller dolls nested within the largest one. Teaching students to write a résumé would, I concluded, permit me to focus on document design and language, especially concision and word choice. (See fig. 2 for a sample student résumé with my comments.)

While these were good lessons to teach, it still felt too artificial, too much like the sort of work you do only for school. It promised no encounter, lacked emotion: I felt challenged to accomplish more. In short, what bothered me was that this résumé would be just for me; yet a real résumé demands an audience, tells a story about who you are, where you’ve been, what you’ve learned along the way, and what you want to do, to become.

Which is when I came up with the idea of contacting the local Rotary Club. I wrote to Beth Pascal, our school-to-work coordinator who has been such a tremendous resource for me over the years. She had visited the previous week to do a workshop on résumé writing, which is what got me
thinking about what else we could do for this unit. Here is my initial email to her:

Hi Beth!

I was considering following up on the career unit you started for us last week by having the kids not only write up their actual resumes but do mock interviews and write cover letters to those who interview them. Any chance we could arrange to have a group of people from the business community come in for a period to conduct these interviews with kids? The idea would be to cluster them all up onto one or, at most, two periods. We could try to do them all in the faculty lounge, since no one ever uses it at that hour. Would hope to do this sometime in the next two weeks if at all possible.

Thanks! I can already hear your mind at work figuring out how we can pull this off!

Jim

By the time I got to school the next morning, Beth, who really does seem able to accomplish anything, had the ball rolling. Before the first-period bell rang, Beth had written the following email to Mike Heffernan from the local Rotary Club:

Mike,

I did a resume workshop with seniors last week. One of the teachers would like to have business professionals come in to conduct mock interviews. Please read below and let me know if you can support me on this!

Thanks,
Beth

EXPLORÉ Program Coordinator

Mike responded almost immediately to Beth’s query via his Blackberry:

This seems like fun, and a good use of us! Several of us did something like this for [someone else] a couple of yrs ago. I am sure we can have 5ish folks. Maybe more if needed. Can u give me a proposed date/time or two??:

Mike

Beth, working as our intermediary the next few days while I taught and Mike worked at his own job, kept the ball rolling. It’s important to note, however, that this could all still happen if a teacher did not have such a person as Beth to help him or her; it would just take a bit more time, but as you see the conversation unfold below, notice that it is largely me and Mike working out the details and letting Beth know when we need her help (after all, she has many other teachers seeking her help also). Here is Beth’s next email to me:

Jim,

Below are questions about the interview workshop! Could you please answer the questions and dates, times, etc. that you would prefer! Thus, I will then be able to arrange the interviewers!

Thanks,
Beth

After some back-and-forth between me and Mike, we arranged a day, then settled down to crafting the experience via email, which proved very easy:

Hi Mike,

Great! I originally wanted to do Monday but worry the kids will come Monday morning having forgotten and I really want this to be a successful experience for you and the kids. The time would be 8-8:50 on any day besides Wednesday and then 9:00-9:40 on Wednesdays if we needed the second day.

Really, Mike, I just want to ensure your success and the students’, so any two days next week. I’m just grateful to you and your people all around for making this happen.

As for criteria for a job they might pretend to apply for? You may have a better sense of how to do that than I do. It should be general enough that all kids will have a context to discuss their skills (or learn how few they have!) and demonstrate their interviewing/speaking skills. Would it make sense to say it was just a sort of general office job that would draw on a mix of skills and require flexibility but also reward initiative, depend on responsibility, communication and people skills? Let me know: will be glad to trade ideas and grateful for any ideas you might have about how to prepare the kids for the job.

Jim

The final exchange between us involved developing the interview questions so I could help them prepare for the experience. Here is our final exchange before the actual interviews:

Jim—

It looks like Wed is the best day for the most Rotarians. 9 to 9:40, right? We should have at least 5 interviewers—but I expect that to increase...
by Monday. Maybe even up to the 8 that we originally wanted.

What do you think of having at least some standard questions for the kids? Then you have a sort of common baseline for comparison. What are your choices for questions? Mine might include:

- What is your greatest strength—and how do you use it?
- What is your greatest weakness—and how do you compensate?
- How do you handle conflict situations with peers—example?
- How do you work under pressure with deadlines—example?

This site has some helpful stuff:

http://www.jobinterviewquestions.org/questions/clerical-questions.asp

http://www.jobinterviewquestions.org/questions/behavioral-interview.asp

Mike

To which I responded:

This is great stuff, Mike. I like the questions you suggest. I will print up the pages you link to and ask students to review them and think about how they might be prepared to answer. Will follow up on Monday with more info and questions. Again, very grateful for your help and vision on this.

Jim

In the Interim: Lessons about Design,
Social Networks, and Reality

As this all unfolded with great speed, I was reminded of what previous experiences with the surrounding community had taught me: the community, especially the business community, has a vested interest in the schools and will do what it can to help. Yes, businesses will often give to the annual fundraiser; what they really want to give, however, is their knowledge, their resources, their wisdom.

In the days leading up to the interviews, we worked on the résumés, which would now have an authentic audience during the forthcoming mock interviews. As I mentioned above, this résumé unit created an opportunity to study different designs for résumés and to consider the psychology of design and first impressions. Students were shocked when I told them that the average amount of time a prospective employer looks at a résumé is about ten seconds as they sort through them. Unfair? they cried. Welcome to the real world! I responded. We studied different résumé designs, considering the merits of and rationales for different features and layouts.

While Mike Heffernan from the Rotary Club and I hashed out the logistics of the interviews, a conversation of a much deeper sort began to surface within and among the seniors. Alicia, a bright, fashionable Latina student who was one of the top students, had no experiences nor any extracurricular activities to list. Yet Joshua, who sat next to her and had a D in the class, had a long list of impressive experiences through his church, all of which would have led him to get any job over Alicia in an actual interview process.

When I asked Alicia about this, she said her parents were very protective and expected her to be home where she could help the family (and they could keep an eye on her!). I said quietly, “I certainly appreciate your parents’ concern for your success and safety, Alicia. You need to help them understand that if all your hard work is to pay off, though, you need to begin to get some experience with the larger world, otherwise a boy like that (I nodded quietly to Joshua) with much lower grades will get hired over you for jobs you should get.”

Others, such as Jonathan, discovered they had acquired skills and knowledge they did not know they could include on the résumé. Jonathan, for example, was running his own personal training business though not getting paid for it. I asked him to tell me what he did. “It sounds to me like you can list skills such as evaluate physical conditioning, develop specialized exercise and dietary regimens, assess products, performance, and progress—just to name a few.” Jonathan sheepishly grinned, impressed with all that he had learned to do without realizing it was anything special.

In addition to the résumés, I added to this unit a few more quick but important requirements

Students were shocked when I told them that the average amount of time a prospective employer looks at a résumé is about ten seconds as they sort through them. Unfair! they cried. Welcome to the real world! I responded.
that were easy but meaningful. Everyone had to do a Web search of their own name to see what results came up since, as I told them, most employers now routinely conduct Internet searches before hiring someone. I mentioned that somewhere I read upwards of 70% of employers said they had not hired someone due to information they found about them online, most often through their Facebook pages. Again, the chorus: Unfair! Again, I, on behalf of the adult world: Reality!

I required that they each join LinkedIn, the Facebook of the professional world, so they could
The Big Day: Time for the Interviews

When the time came for the big day, my main concern was the most basic: Would they dress appropriately? This allowed for an important discussion the previous day about attire and why it matters. In addition, this conversation about attire expanded to a larger dialogue about first impressions, which included everything from posture and handshakes to piercings and tattoos. When I got to school the next morning and saw Nick in his three-piece suit, my first thought was: Yes, but he’s a drama kid, so of course he will dress up! As it turned out, however, nearly all rose to the occasion, all the more impressive given that it was a first-period senior class.

see what questions it asked. I made them all join Twitter. Why? Because the smallest thing can make the biggest difference in the job world: every business now makes Twitter a regular part of its platform. If you know what it is and how to use it and the other person doesn’t, you get the job. I also asked them, during this time, to interview two adults, preferably over 30, about their experiences with work, both seeking and doing it, which students had to take notes and reflect on as part of this larger inquiry on the subject.

And finally, in addition to their personal résumé, I asked them all to write what I called a speculative résumé. Kids have no idea how people get to be what they are as adults. They think you go straight from point A to point B. The speculative résumé, which I provided them an example of, asks them to imagine they are about 40 and to write a résumé that details what they do; they must also imagine all the jobs, programs, classes, and degrees that led to their current (imaginary) position. My example traces the path of a fictional CEO of a hazardous waste disposal company who began by getting an associate of arts degree in fire science at a local community college. With that degree in hand, he got hired as a firefighter who, early on in his career, began taking extra classes, getting additional certifications (e.g., in hazardous materials inspections) that not only increased his salary but gave him knowledge others lacked, thus helping him rise through the ranks till he was a regional leader of the fire department.
Connecting the Classroom, Community, and Curriculum

Thus prepared, students waited in my room, some restless in their nice clothes, while Beth ushered them in and out of the faculty lounge where the interviews took place at eight round tables. We had eight businesspeople, ranging from CEOs to architects, local business owners to managers, all of whom gave up their mornings to interview 35 seniors for a prospective job as an office assistant in a bail bond business. This whimsical choice, the idea of the Rotarians, turned out to be brilliant as it showed kids that skills they do not even think about or realize they have (e.g., ability to respect clients’ confidentiality) are often those most valuable in some cases. We were able to commandeer the faculty lounge tables—since no one uses that room at that point in the day—for the interviews, which fit perfectly into the 50-minute period.

The day was a great success, the Rotarians having contributed their time and intelligence to the school and the students having brushed up, however briefly and safely, against the world that awaited them on the other side of graduation. We interviewed all 35 seniors in one period, each of them getting about a five-minute interview, which most of the students felt was plenty of time and authentic (and suitably stressful).

Following Up: The Importance of Feedback

Mike Heffernan wrote me that night with his observations and those of the Rotarians, which he had solicited that afternoon. After further discussion via email, we agreed it would make a much stronger impression on the students if he returned the next day to discuss his observations and those of the other Rotarians. Here are some of their comments:

• “Generally, the students were prepared, except for 2 who did not know the job responsibilities. Those 2 did a good job for the rest of the interview but they lost out in terms of ‘first impression’—and it’s rare that you can ever totally recover.”

• “Each of them looked me in the eye on more than one occasion. Good!”

• “I wish they had used my name at least once. I tried to use their name several times, hoping that would encourage them to use my name. Using the interviewer’s name is important—you paid attention; it’s respectful.”

• “One seemed more sensitive to the confidentiality of the position than the others. Others seemed willing to talk to peers and/or friends about specifics of a bail bonds workplace.”

• “All but one were dressed properly for a job interview—again, you paid attention; it’s respectful.”

• “After telling them that I was interviewing five candidates for the job, I asked them to convince me that I should hire them. All five did a good job.”

• “All 5 interviewees thanked me at the end. Good!”

Mike stayed the whole period, responding to students’ questions about his own experience and asking them questions. The students were clearly

![Rotary President Mike Heffernan offering feedback to students. Photo by Jim Burke.](image)
grateful and genuinely impressed by this experience and wisdom. As Chris Heredia wrote the following day when we reflected on the whole experience:

This experience provided me with important knowledge about how to act during an interview. For example, I didn’t know if it was impolite to talk about salary during the interview; also, the experience showed me how significant a handshake and remembering your interviewer’s name is when creating the impression that someone is prepared for the job and really wants it. During the interview, my interviewer was very considerate, giving me extra seconds to prepare my answer to her questions. She encouraged me by asking for details about the answers I gave. She always posed a follow-up question to see how much information I could provide her with and whether I would be a worthy candidate for the job. When we finished our interview, she allowed me to ask her questions about how she started her own business. I felt thankful to her for allowing me to ask these questions because it allowed me to see how she mapped out her future, used her past experiences to strive for her goals, and apply the knowledge that she had received in college. Finally, I really appreciated how Mr. Heffernan returned the next day to provide us with feedback about our performance on the interviews. The feedback gave us very useful information. It pointed out our little flaws. Using the advice the Rotary Club gave us, I believe it will be very helpful when I go for interviews in the future.

Now What? Writing for Real Audiences

One last part of this unit, again one teachers often struggle to make meaningful, was the business letter. Driving home that day, thinking about Mike’s presentation that morning, the Rotarians’ time spent interviewing my seniors, I realized we had the perfect opportunity to write authentic letters in the business format. As soon as I got home, I secured the computer lab for the following day and set about creating an annotated sample of the sort of business letter I expected them to write.

Annotated—or what I call “instructive”—sample documents, such as my business letter (see fig. 3), achieve several objectives worth mentioning briefly. First, it gives me a chance to better understand what I expect students to do and what skills or knowledge they may need to meet those expecta-
learning to state their name at the outset of the interview, studying the history of the company and shaking the interviewer’s hand when it’s over.

- Select the mock company from a real company that the students can relate to and research as part of the preparation.
- Create evaluation sheets (with an area for comments section) for students and Rotarians to complete after the interviews.

- Schedule a follow-up session (preferably the following day) to discuss the suggestions and evaluations. Possibly put the results on a spreadsheet to distribute to the students to review. Graphing the results might be an interesting idea.

I can’t think of any more suggestions! Wonderful learning experience, Jim!

Beth
Observations

Perhaps the most important lesson of this unit for me—remember, you are reading about the first time I did any of this—is that it’s OK to jump first and figure it out later so long as you are guided by the right principles and get good people to help you along the way. I did not reject or ignore any element of the English curriculum, nor was I reckless; I simply accomplished more with the material than I was otherwise expected to do. Another crucial decision: I sought out and used those resources—within school and the larger community—that could help me achieve these more ambitious ends. To that end, Beth Pascal and Mike Heffernan (and those Rotarians he recruited) were instrumental.

The Common Core State Standards offer additional help in guiding our decisions about what to teach. Too often it seems, based on what I read and sometimes see around the country, the thinking gravitates toward the item, the standard, as opposed to the idea or perhaps the ideal. While I have not labeled every step or aligned it with the appropriate standard (nor did I when developing this unit), one can easily see at each step the close attention to reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Assessment, moreover, is integrated and used throughout to inform and improve both instruction and student performance. Perhaps just as meaningful, at least in the eyes of the business community represented here by the Rotary Club, is the extent to which this work accords with the standards of effective communication that the American business community expects from our graduates.

I will let one of my students from that class have the final word on the value and meaning of the work we did during those weeks. Ryan, a student who had identified learning difficulties and struggled at times with much of the work, wrote the following shortly after the unit as part of a periodic reflection on and evaluation of the class and my instruction:

So far this year, I feel as though this class has been a great experience and one that is well-suited for a senior in high school. As a senior, I am close to entering the real world and I feel like this class is set to prepare me for that.

One thing I really liked was the job interview and resume unit. I feel that this will help me greatly down the road in gaining valuable experience needed. I also now have a better understanding of what employers look for in a resume and an interview.

I really appreciated Mrs. Pascal coming in and demonstrating what not to do in front of an adult when you are interviewing or applying for a job. I also appreciated the critique I received from the Rotary person about my job interview and look to carry what I learned into the real world.

Ryan sees here a connection to the world for which he knows he must be ready—and which is coming at him fast. When my father, who left high school after his first year, later applied for a job at the California Office of State Printing at the age of 19, he had no skills to speak of beyond the ability to learn and the willingness to work. Thirty years later, as one of the heads of the division that had grown increasingly dependent on computers and other sophisticated technologies, he demanded résumés from and interviewed those same entry-level workers with a level of scrutiny unimaginable when he first applied decades earlier. They had to have what he never achieved: a college degree. They had to develop, once hired, what he had earned: craft wisdom, that deep knowledge about a trade to which he had apprenticed himself, but also the knowledge about people that would enable him to help them learn and do their best work. That is the knowledge we, too, need as we endeavor to do the same with those kids who come each day to our classroom to work with and learn from us before graduating into their larger lives in the community where they must find their place and, with it, a sense of purpose and a feeling of pride.

It’s OK to jump first and figure it out later so long as you are guided by the right principles and get good people to help you along the way.

Works Cited
Connecting the Classroom, Community, and Curriculum


Jim Burke teaches English at Burlingame High School where he has worked for 20 years, teaching pretty much every English class at some point. He is the author of *What’s the Big Idea: Question-Driven Units to Motivate Reading, Writing, and Thinking* and is currently working on a new edition of *The English Teacher’s Companion*, which will be published in the fall. He created the English Companion Ning, a social network for English teachers that now has more than 30,000 members and has received the Best Social Network for Educators Award two years in a row. He wishes to thank the Burlingame Rotary Club and Beth Pascal for their support of this project and the difference they made in the lives of the students. Email him at jburke@englishcompanion.com.