Daily Deep Learning: Fitness for the Mind

David McCully, a phys-ed teacher, had become frustrated over the years. His energetic fifteen-year-old boys were not demonstrating maturity in collaboration. In spite of his best efforts, they, just didn't seem to get it. He needed to try something different.

He asked the boys a question: "What makes a great teammate?" After some conversation, he cued up a Skype call with a professional athlete to chime in on the conversation and this hooked the students' interest. Students then articulated their own criteria, which included responsibility, respect, positive attitude, dedication, and selflessness. It was this list that became the students' shared reference point for the next month. They used this list to self-evaluate, set weekly goals, and reflect regularly. They also created videos to communicate these concepts, which encouraged them to use different skills than they normally used in phys-ed. A final reflective journal invited them to review their progress over their weekly surveys. Last, McCully asked students to identify others who could evaluate them on the way they collaborate. The boys chose contacts and others from inside and beyond the class to comment on the criteria they had formerly created.

"You need these skills for your entire life."
Student

That was a lightbulb moment for students. Until then, many students did not realize how they were presenting to others. One boy said, "It's allowed me to see the good stuff I do and the bad stuff I do." Another reflected, "You could be doing something damaging to other people and you don't know it." Others recognized that the skill of collaboration is transferable, that "relationships off the field are as important as on the field" and that "you need these skills for your entire life." In the fast-paced world of schools, we often assume that students understand our expectations. Especially at the secondary level, we assume they don't need concepts spelled out so plainly. McCully found that the explicit focus and breaking it down into component parts helped students to understand how their behaviors were affecting others.

This teacher's experience reminds us that Deep Learning can happen daily within a regular classroom setting. With explicit attention to the competencies and some regular opportunities for meaningful reflection, students can acquire deeper understanding that can get them in great shape for tackling future challenges.