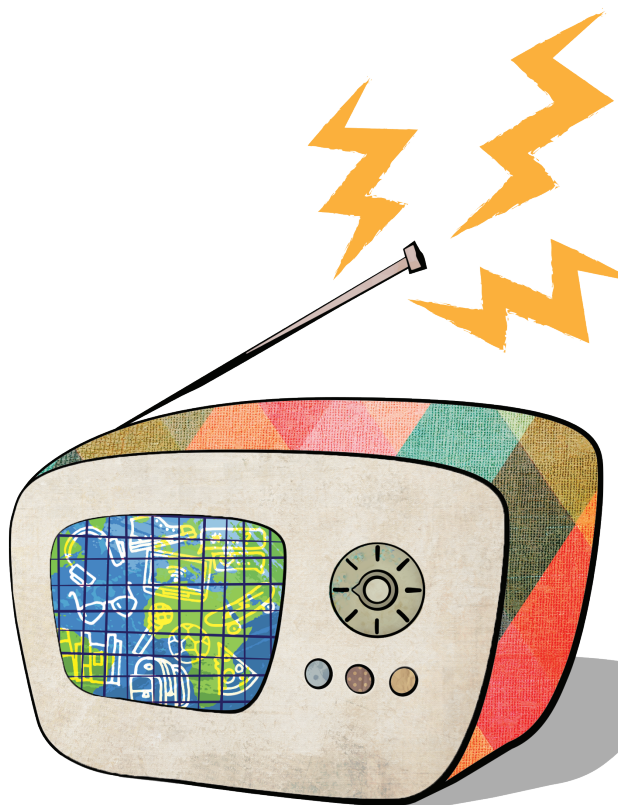


Tuned-In Teaching



Dear Readers,

Much like the diet phenomenon *Eat This, Not That*, this series aims to replace some existing practices with approaches that are more effective—healthier, if you will—for our students. We hope to draw attention to practices that have little support in research or professional wisdom, and to offer alternatives that have greater support. Each text is collaboratively written by authors representing research and practice. Section 1 offers practitioner perspective(s) on a practice in need of replacing and helps us understand the challenges, temptations, and misunderstandings that have led us to this ineffective approach. Section 2 provides researcher perspective(s) on the lack of research to support the ineffective practice(s), and reviews research supporting better approaches. In Section 3, the author(s) representing practitioner perspective(s) give detailed descriptions of how to implement these better practices. By the end of each book, you will understand both what not to do, and what to do, to improve student learning.

It takes courage to question one's own practice—to shift away from what you may have seen throughout your years in education and toward something new that you may have seen few, if any, colleagues use. We applaud you for demonstrating that courage and wish you the very best in your journey from this to that.

Best wishes,

— *M. Colleen Cruz* and *Nell K. Duke*, *Series Editors*

NOT THIS  BUT THAT

Tuned-In Teaching: Centering Youth Culture for an Active and Just Classroom

ANTERO GARCIA AND ERNEST MORRELL

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INTRODUCTION

M. Colleen Cruz

If you're anything like me, you have a friend or family member, maybe someone in your community, who you talk to when you want someone to "give it to you straight." These are the people who refuse to lie or flatter us and will never gaslight us. For me it's been a small handful of people over the years: my mom, my hairstylist, and Sam, who runs the bodega on my corner to name a few. When I am wrestling with something, when an idea I have or an action I want to take is new and fragile and I just want to ruminate on it, I never talk to them. I know that I should only ask them for their wisdom if I am truly ready to hear what they think. Because they will absolutely tell the truth. But when I have hit the limit of the work I can do on my own, when I suspect I am flattering myself or simply know I need a fresh perspective, I reach out to them.

"Hey, Sam. One coffee, regular. One egg and cheese. And one question—do you think I can come off as cold sometimes? Or do people know I'm an introvert?"

As Sam slides my coffee over, he gives me the look, "OK. I have a lot to say about this . . ." Agree or not with what Sam and other truth-tellers say, we know that we can't go back to *not* knowing. Once we find the answers, we can't unknow.

The text you are about to read is the book version of that person. I suspect that if you are holding this book, it's because you feel an itch, a curiosity, perhaps even a sneaking suspicion, that your teaching could be more tuned in and that you could be more connected to your students and their needs and ways

of learning in this world. Whether this is a new(ish) area of study, begun during pandemic teaching, or something that has been developing for years, matters less than that you have metaphorically shown up at the bodega, ready for Ernest Morrell and Antero Garcia to give it to you straight.

Teaching and learning theory, research and demands, although never static, have been developing at warp speed. Combine that with the steady hum of cultural shift, youth voice amplification, and digital media outreach, and even the most up-to-date, of-the-moment, connected pedagogue is bound to feel a bit less sure-footed. In this book, Ernest and Antero slide over the coffee and the rest of the goods. They name the obstacles to authentic connection teachers face every day, and they let us know that weird disconnected feeling is not entirely our fault (yet). As they take us through the decades of research and scholarship, they show us that much of what might feel disparate at first glance (What do studies on critical literacies have in common with mathematics, let alone youth participatory action research projects?) is connected in deep and compelling ways. Antero and Ernest then look us straight in the eye and let us know exactly how we can tune in to our students. Not through gimmicks or awkward attempts at being the cool teacher, but through actionable steps that will never go out of style.

SECTION 1

NOT  THIS



*Out-of-Touch
Teaching: Its
Accidental Origins*

ANTERO GARCIA AND ERNEST MORRELL

Consider, for a moment, the incredible energy that courses through the veins of your classroom each day. From the vibrant energy of students converging with enthusiasm on the ideas and challenges you pose to them, to the authentic audiences they speak to via the work they produce, to the transformative texts that students scrutinize, ours are classrooms of possibilities and hope. Sure, your day-to-day teaching life may not always sing in harmony with these exact possibilities all the time, but you, certainly, have felt what it is like when your classroom comes to life and you, your students, and your curriculum resonate and live *in the moment* of learning and connection.

We begin this book with a recognition that these moments are *never* permanent. Memorable classroom experiences exist because they stand in contrast to what the rest of school deems as ordinary. So, let's agree on a couple caveats about the limits of your classroom instruction:

1. There is no such thing as a perfect classroom, only the pedagogical boundaries that you and your students build and traverse together.
2. You will make mistakes in your teaching career. Embrace these as gifts from which you and your students will grow.

Because our classrooms ebb and flow with the various degrees of what can happen in any given moment, our capacity to shift and sway with the demands of the present is perhaps one of the most fundamental and least supported aspects of our profession. Furthermore, our classrooms sway, rock, and jostle with the nature of the world. If our classrooms are disrupted or moved online as a result of

Our classrooms sway, rock, and jostle with the nature of the world.

a global pandemic (as a contemporary example) or are feeling the sting of a local injustice or activist issue shaping your school community, these are phenomena that cannot be walled off from the classroom.

Whether we bring them up or not, these are topics that are here and as present in the minds of our students as the texts in front of them or, worse, the abstract essay topics and standardized tests they may be asked to take.

As we consider some of the ways in which we can understand our role as teachers, let's also consider the ways that students play an integral role in transforming a classroom into a space for radical innovation. As a collective, teachers

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and students can have aligned goals for action, engagement, and joy in our shared learning journey. This is a process of ensuring that we, as teachers, are working in solidarity with our community of learners. It is a humbling, rewarding task. It is also not always an easy one.

Despite all these exciting possibilities, sometimes our classrooms can feel *stuck*. The rut you feel might come from a sense of doing the same thing day in and day out. It might come from students who don't seem

as excited when engaging with the curriculum as they might be. The rut might even come from a creeping sense that what and how you are teaching feel further disconnected from the rapidly shifting world beyond the walls of your classroom. Particularly as they naturally progress through adolescent growth and prepare for the wondrous world that they will change beyond school, young people's lives are complex. Importantly, our world is also one that is always changing.

At some point in your career, this feeling of "stuckness" will creep into the corners and crevices of your classroom. Maybe you're feeling a sense of sameness: you're teaching the

same texts in the same ways with the same tools year in and year out. Maybe you're feeling stuck, on the other hand, because of the sheer amount of change happening around you: the constant ebb and flow of administrative oversight that purports to know what you and your students need rather than relying on your expertise as the teacher. Maybe you're just plain tired. The physical, intellectual, and emotional labor of teaching is profound, and the world of professional development does not always treat teachers with the dignity and respect that must be afforded to one of our most important professions. These, and whatever other reasons you might feel stuck, are all valid. We are writing this in the hopes of supporting your journey to moving back in touch with your pedagogy, with your students, with your discipline, and with yourself. Many different reasons may be to blame, and we're here to focus on transformation and to offer a vocabulary for moving beyond out-of-touch teaching.

The physical, intellectual, and emotional labor of teaching is profound, and the world of professional development does not always treat teachers with the dignity and respect that must be afforded to one of our most important professions.

Naming What We Need to Change in a Changing World

Although the feelings of uncertainty, joy, passion, love, anger, and curiosity of today's students may mirror the same feelings that you once felt sitting in similar desks in similar classrooms in the past, the world that students are learning and interacting in is substantially different.

One concept we have explored with our own students through lessons of critical literacy is the need to *name* ideas, places, and acts around us. Naming is a powerful, liberatory act (Freire and Macedo 1987). In the spirit of this process, we specifically label what we mean when we refer to out-of-touch teaching throughout this book. *Out-of-touch teaching refers*

See Section 3 for a variety of practical strategies for tuned-in, connected teaching.

to pedagogical choices, interactions with students, and instructional materials that do not make an immediate impact on the lives of students, that do not actively work to transform the social conditions of schooling, or that are disconnected from the interests and expertise of contemporary students in the present world. In the context of middle and high school classrooms, such approaches proliferate in many different aspects of instruction. Though we offer multiple strategies throughout this volume, we draw your instructional consideration to a few specific aspects of your teaching:

- The text and curricular selections in your classroom—Who writes the texts that students interact with? When were they produced? In what kinds of modalities and languages?
- The modes of writing and communication that are taught—Who are the implied and explicit audiences for student writing? What modes do students write in? Who provides feedback?
- Relationships with students—What efforts do you make to get to know your students? What biases might you be exhibiting?
- Your own (shifting) interests as a teacher—Is your curriculum at all reflecting the ideas, topics, and content that you've been interested in? Do you give yourself space to breathe and grow in your work?
- The world beyond your classroom—How does your classroom open up or disregard the sociopolitical, emotional, geographic, digital, and *analog* world beyond your school? What policies, assumptions, and material constraints limit this engagement with the world?

As we discuss the research and suggest possibilities for addressing each of these aspects in the remainder of this book, we discuss *how* out-of-touch teaching happens.

Despite the implied idea that we just naturally slide out of touch in our practice, there are important reasons why your teaching might be out of touch. Furthermore, we want you to know it's not your fault! As we work on improving our practice—both collectively and individually—we do so recognizing that there are substantial factors inhibiting the teaching profession and the act of teaching joyfully. This book is not about letting these factors off the hook. Dwindling school funding, an overemphasis on assessment, the stratification of learning opportunities based on socioeconomic difference: the reasons that teachers struggle are profound and adversely affect the learning (and life) outcomes of young people, particularly students from Black, indigenous, and nondominant communities. We go into these factors next, and we note here that there are ongoing movements that we must align ourselves with in the name of teaching and learning for joy and freedom. In fact, in moving one's teaching practice to be ever more in touch, we recognize that doing so can naturally help finesse your own role as an advocate to push against the very reasons classrooms may be out of touch to begin with.

How Did We Get Here and How Do We Get Out?

No teacher aspires to foster an out-of-touch teaching practice. The subtle shift, perhaps from one year to another, is incremental. Unreflective and unsupported teaching can naturally move in this direction; when we are not actively considering the needs of our students within the world around them, our teaching (and their learning) suffers.

In our own experience and in our work with teachers across the United States, we've seen out-of-touch teaching proliferate for several significant reasons that we feel it is important to name. Just as we acknowledge *why* being tuned in to students is imperative to improving equitable learning

opportunities in all schools, we acknowledge that the lumbering of teachers into out-of-touch pedagogical practices is one that's often and invisibly imposed on our profession.

Increasingly the need for teachers to prepare students within classrooms is being narrowly defined through an emphasis on test taking that is high-stakes and stress-inducing. In many contexts, teacher evaluations are tied to student performance on such exams and, understandably,

energy and attention can get devoted to preparing for and “teaching to” tests.

This layer of accountability, from our perspective, gets in the way of powerful, present teaching practices. It also takes away teacher expertise. When the mandates on classrooms drive how we teach, the *why* of our profession is also uprooted.

When the mandates on classrooms drive how we teach, the why of our profession is also uprooted.

Similar to the role of high-stakes testing and accountability, the serene picture of a quiet and “controlled” classroom might also pose a threat to innovative teaching practices. As educators, we are often guided to keep classes quiet—even when students, their hormones, and engaging curriculum might make students laugh and debate and move out of their seats enthusiastically and purposefully. Think back to some of the advice you may have heard in your first few years of teaching or even as a student teacher. Well-intentioned suggestions not to rock the boat within a new job are suggestions of how to fit into an often-archaic school culture rather than to forge into the uncharted waters of teaching in the present moment.

Furthermore, our classrooms often become out of touch because of a problem of stasis. Like many other aspects of schooling today, our classrooms often suffer beneath the weight of the expectations and demands placed upon them. It is an illusion that the lesson, text, assessment, or method that worked in the past remains the most ideal pedagogical approach for engaging young people in the present. We, as

educators, remain lulled into a false belief that what worked in the past is always the right decision for the present. Whether it's having an out-of-body experience while teaching the symbolism in *Of Mice and Men* for the thirty-fifth time to students who are barely staying awake or questioning the lack of diversity described in the U.S. history curriculum, we know your classroom doesn't have to be mired in what was done in years prior.

The frustrations of this feeling of stuckness become compounded by the pressure to prepare students for outdated expectations of what college preparation means two decades into the twenty-first century. How students learn, participate, and *succeed* in college looks very different from approaches in the past, and this lack of clarity further unanchors today's secondary classrooms from the world that awaits young people beyond them.

As an example, in work encouraging students to write letters to the future president (in both 2016 and 2020), Garcia and his colleagues (2020) explored student letter writing and multimodal production. Building off partnership work led by the National Writing Project and KQED, an online platform allowed students to share their writing with a large public audience. This was standards-aligned writing that also allowed students to speak to topics they were interested in, advocate around particular issues of justice, and do so for an audience that was beyond the scope of singular classrooms. Much of this work dealt with complex disciplinary content knowledge in STEM subjects, such as climate change and—in 2020—the ways pandemics function globally. Though the project may, on its surface, look like something students have done year in and year out, this project utilized social media and prepared students for forms of civic engagement that are fundamentally different than in the past.

Finally, as a separate, equally important reason why out-of-touch teaching happens, we recognize that the world is constantly in motion. The trends, ideas, and modes of cultural

production when teachers first entered the profession evolve, shift, and—in some cases—are forgotten. What might have been cutting-edge forms of “pedagogical content knowledge” (Shulman 1987) in one point in time might be deemed hackneyed or working at odds with the current fashions of teaching and learning.

The Pressure of Staying Up to Date

Keeping our classrooms tuned in to the demands of students that must receive the best possible education—not only for themselves but for strengthening the civic fabric that we send them out to weave—is a big demand. It is also a thrilling privilege for us as teachers: what an amazing opportunity it is to be able to positively transform and grow alongside students and the world today!

However, although this work can feel exhilarating and exhausting—perpetually trying to be mindful of the present to be tuned in to the lives of students—we think there is a more sustainable way to keep your instructional practices connected and relevant to the needs of young people today. In the section that follows, we’ll detail some of the research on *why* teaching becomes out of touch as well as some of the key theories for how to transform our classrooms. We’ll then use the last section of this book to focus on six key approaches that teachers can take today. We do not offer specific answers. Rather, this book was written in a time that has since become the past and we write with strategies for keeping your classroom living and breathing within the current needs of the students

See Section 2 for research on why teaching becomes out of touch and theories for how to transform classrooms.

before you. This is an invitation to learn and grow *alongside* the suggestions and research presented here. We hope you slide pedagogically into the wild possibilities of the present and transform your classroom for the societies of the future.

AFTERWORD

Nell K. Duke

Many readers of this book are familiar with the concept of a professional learning community or PLC. EdGlossary defines a PLC as “a group of educators that meets regularly, shares expertise, and works collaboratively to improve teaching skills and the academic performance of students.” A wide range of activities occur under the banner of a PLC, among them examining student assessment data, reading books and articles selected by participants, and sharing instructional strategies.

A cousin of the PLC is a teacher study group or TSG. In a recent article, Allison Firestone, Rebecca Cruz, and Janelle Rodl (2020) reviewed research on TSGs, finding that they are a promising approach to fostering teacher development and student achievement. TSGs are similar to PLCs in that they are collaborative groups of educators who meet on a regular basis to engage in inquiry regarding their teaching and their students’ learning. However, TSGs differ from PLCs in that “they are predicated upon a preplanned scope and sequence and content grounded in empirical research . . . by design, a TSG includes the provision of new content in order to increase collective knowledge by leveraging some form of expert input (e.g., a university faculty member or master teacher) to facilitate integration of new knowledge and skills into the inquiry process” (677). In other words, TSGs value both knowledge from teacher participants and knowledge from external expertise, often in the form of research.

In this remarkable book, Antero Garcia and Ernest Morrell highlight that there is a third source of knowledge that must be central in teacher development—students themselves. Garcia and Morrell help us to understand the importance of learning about the students in front of us: their cultural backgrounds, their identities, their interests, their digital lives, their ideas, their expertise, their humor and play, their families, and the organizations in their communities that affect and are affected by them. Learning about the students in front of us on an ongoing basis—being *in touch* with them—renders teaching more effective and more humanizing.

In a way, then, every day with students is an opportunity for professional development, in which the professional development providers are students themselves. PLCs or TSGs become an opportunity in part to process what is learned from students, to work with colleagues to build collective understandings (for example, of digital literacies popular with students), and to integrate what is learned from students with learnings from research and practice.

Like any form of professional learning, professional learning from and with students will not be easy. As Garcia and Morrell note, “No teacher aspires to foster an out-of-touch teaching practice,” yet it is all too easy to teach in a way that is uninformed or underinformed by the students in front of us. Even with a deep understanding of our students, there will be challenges in integrating and acting upon what we learn. For example, Garcia and Morrell probe, “What aspects of your teaching practice are you willing to negotiate and cede to student ideas and ingenuity?” But meeting these challenges will be well worth it. In fact perhaps my favorite aspect of this book is the ways in which the authors steel us against challenges and inspire us to action and improvement. Whether in a PLC or TSG, let’s tune in to our students ASAP.