

CRISS AND THE AT-RISK STUDENT

This fall, *Comments from CRISS* deals with an issue that faces all of us as teachers and educators—the at-risk student. This is an ever-increasing problem in all schools, whether they are in small, rural communities or in large, inner cities. We have all seen those headlines splashed across newspapers and the covers of magazines stating that student drop-out rates are increasing in the United States. As a result, the problem falls onto the classroom teacher to solve and correct. Teachers and educators are constantly being asked to be “accountable” for the learning process in their schools. Because the CRISS program and philosophy deal with a variety of learning styles, the at-risk student, who can’t succeed with more traditional teaching methods, is finding a way to understand and connect with the learning process.

In Kalispell, we have an innovative program which seeks to deal with the issue of students at risk. “Northstar,” as this program is entitled, reaches approximately 35-40 ninth graders. According to the syllabus, “Northstar is a team-taught class with the purpose of reaching out to students having difficulty adjusting to the school environment due to emotional problems resulting from family or social stress. Through teaching problem solving, anger management, personal responsibility, goal setting, etc. and through intensive one-on-one communication, teachers try to help these students achieve academic and social success in school.” The overall objective is to teach “emotional literacy” so that the student is aware of his/her own emotions and learns how to control them.

While talking to the two instructors of the program, I realized how important CRISS and its philosophy are to the at-risk student’s learning process. As Pam and Carrie, the Northstar team, began to tell me about their program, I observed their enthusiasm and dedication to their goal—that all students succeed and become working members of the community. This year the program is scheduled for four classroom periods which include English, mathematics, a social/emotional program, and a study period.

Background knowledge is a key factor in their lesson plans. Both teachers agree that it is a “must” to make the lesson relevant and to find out what the students know. Next, they say, it’s critical to set purposes for the class. Pam and Carrie use a variety of methods to elicit the students’ background knowledge and to set purposes including journal writing, questioning, and art with quick-draw sketches. The teachers also agree that helping the students be

metacognitive is extremely important. Students write in their journals about their thinking process, what is working for them and what is not working, so they can constantly monitor their own progress.

During the social/emotional period, students deal with such issues as personal growth, social graces, and how to be a member of a community. These areas are explored through brainstorming, group activities, and problem-solving. Carrie and Pam use a variation of the two-column problem/solution learning guide that includes the four steps: What is your goal? What are your plans? What action will be taken? and What are the results? See following example:

Goal	
What is your goal?	<i>to pass math class</i>
Plan	
How do you plan to do this?	<i>do my homework study more</i>
Action	
Did you follow your plan?	<i>I did my homework two days this week, but messed up today and got a zero.</i>
Review	
How did your plan work out?	<i>Well, I started out O. K., but got lazy, so my grade is just above passing. I can’t goof off anymore.</i>

These kids are “alternative-type” learners I was told. This means they are not organized, they are right-brain learners, and they are quite artistic. Does it sound like CRISS fits in here? You bet! Both Carrie and Pam agree that the students need to be actively involved in the lesson, so they use

a lot of discussion and organizing techniques. One lesson I observed dealt with the movie *Dead Man Walking*. They had the students view this movie and take notes in a three-column format. See the chart (*below*): the true victim, the fake victim, and personal power people. Of course, much class discussion took place about the meaning of the terms prior to the students filling in the chart. When Pam and Carrie were sure the students understood the terms and were comfortable with the structure, the students were instructed to complete the chart. As they watched the video, they recorded names *and* evidence in each column. Afterwards, Pam and Carrie facilitated a class discussion from the notes taken during the video. Students had to “defend” their positions using their notes.

VIDEO NOTES: “DEAD MAN WALKING”		
“TRUE” VICTIM	“FAKE” VICTIM	PERSONAL POWER PEOPLE

Pam and Carrie also told me about another variation of the three-column guide they use with the class. They incorporate journaling, discussion, and a content frame in a unit dealing with handling emotions, specifically anger. This unit is divided into three lessons. First, the students are given the journal topic, “Describe a time when you let your anger take over.” They are to explain the consequences of their anger and what strategies they used to gain back control. After the students write in their journals, Pam and Carrie facilitate a discussion with the entire class on the degrees of anger. Then the class creates an Anger Continuum which ranges from 1 (annoyed)--10 (rage), with words, such as “exasperated,” in between. Students talk about the various stages of anger and the three major types of behavior: passive, aggressive, and assertive. During the second lesson, the students create and fill in a frame based on their discussion of the three types of behavior and how they are exhibited through facial expressions, body

language or gestures, and voice. (*See next page*) Through teacher questioning, the students stay actively involved in the discussion and take notes on their chart from what they hear. The third lesson involves another journal entry. The students write about how they usually handle their anger and give an example. Students have success with this three-lesson unit since it ties into their own prior knowledge, is metacognitive, and includes writing, discussion, and organizing.

Many of the assignments in the class are geared toward creativity, incorporating writing and visual representation. One such project is a “Personal Profile” that each student completes at the very beginning of the school year. Within this profile, they write at least three papers. In the first, they write about themselves. Secondly, they recount a memorable event in their life. Finally, they describe an item or a value that is very important to them. Students are encouraged to use sketches, magazine pictures, or photos to illustrate their profile. The purpose of this assignment, for the teachers, is to gain understanding of the students’ writing skills and insight into the personalities of the students in their class.

Mapping is another CRISS strategy used frequently in these classes. It helps the students organize their thoughts. Since many of these students are “right-brain” learners, this activity appeals to them because it allows them to express themselves creatively. The teachers often use maps as a pre-writing assignment and after the class has mapped a topic, they “slip-in” a writing assignment as a follow-up and as a way for the students to internalize the lesson.

After I visited Pam’s and Carrie’s class and observed their teaching, I became convinced that CRISS is critical for the at-risk student. I saw students actively involved in the learning process and teachers acting as facilitators in the classroom. I also saw teachers and students working together and learning from each other. What an exciting place to be! 🌟 (*Please see related article, “Shakespeare and At-Risk Students”, on the next page.*)

Shakespeare and At-Risk Students?

Teaching Shakespeare can be difficult in any situation, but with a classroom full of students who really don't want to be in school at all, it could be impossible. Not so for Jo Shay, a teacher at Flathead High School in Kalispell. Jo, who teaches a Communication Class for At-Risk students in grades 10 - 12, decided to use the CRISS strategy of mapping to introduce a part of the class curriculum and tie this in with Shakespeare's Hamlet. The class first examined Maslow's Basic Human Needs and created concept maps on the five groups of human needs: physiological, safety, affiliation, self-esteem, and self-actualization. Each student then added details and subcategories for each of the five groups. (See example below.) Afterwards, the students explained their maps to the class. Then, the class viewed the movie Hamlet with the instructions to look carefully at the characters, to figure out why they did what they did, and to determine what were the characters' needs. After viewing the video, Jo carried on a lively class discussion with the students about the characters' actions using Maslow's five basic needs. She began with the question, "Why was Hamlet's father killed?" The class first suggested the reason for his death was for safety needs; but, with further discussion, they determined it was wanting self-actualization. The students became actively involved in the discussion and were much more comfortable analyzing the characters. As a follow-up activity, Jo had the class write a paragraph on: "I wonder why I do what I do sometimes! What need do I fill?" Again, students were actively involved and were also being metacognitive. What a great way to incorporate a classic into the curriculum!



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