



THE **x**Potential

LEARNING WITHOUT BARRIERS

Fall 2008

the **road** to **success**

Advice for learning coaches from the K¹² universe



TIPS
for working
with your
K¹² teacher

From the Mind of Bror



How Will We Survive Another Year?

Back-to-school time again—how do we keep from feeling dizzy, every time the Earth comes around the sun?

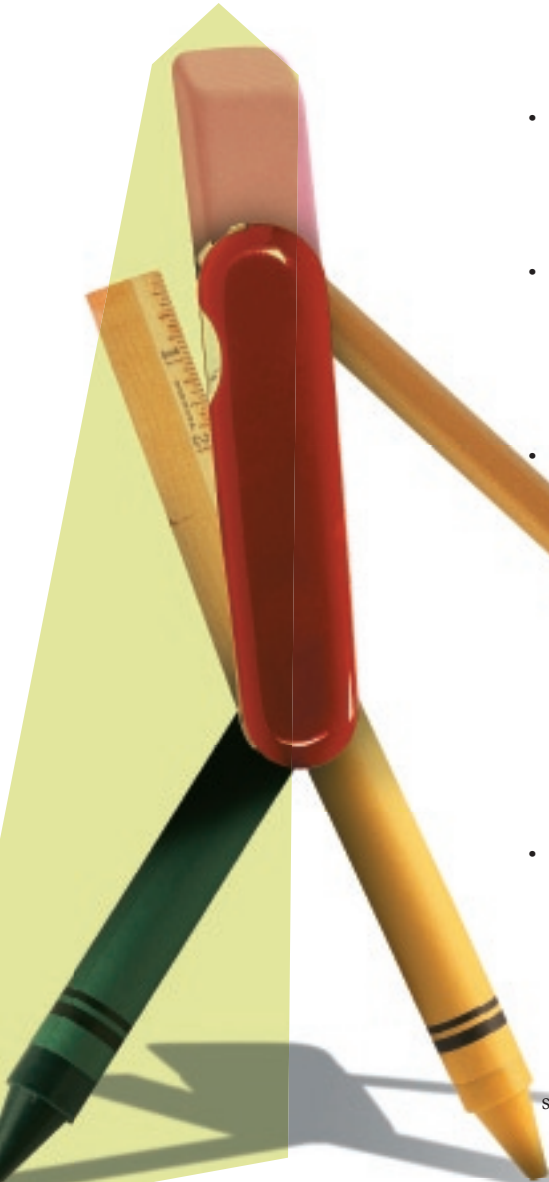
By Bror Saxberg, K¹² chief learning officer

A FEW THOUGHTS BACKED UP BY RESEARCH TO HELP YOU GET STABILIZED:

- Talk to your littlest ones (0–3 years old). Research shows that no matter what the economic background, kids who've had more conversational words (not just command words) spoken to them early get an academic lift for years. Lots of one-sided conversations! Pouring friendly sentences like chocolate sauce over the ice cream of their forming minds (yes, it's still summer) primes the machinery to speak.
- Sleep more than you—or your kids, for that matter—do now. Kids should sleep at least nine hours a night, maybe 10 or more. Children want to stay up—parents, too, conspire with too many scheduled activities into the evening. But kids with less sleep lose their learning edge: As little as an hour less per day over several weeks can cost kids years of educational performance.
- Don't expect a single “learning style” for your child. Famed researcher Howard Gardner agrees this is not the correct interpretation of his work on multiple intelligences. Instead, be flexible as you help your kids with difficult topics—many styles can work. [Mind you, few things will stick in a child's mind longer than the image of a capering adult dancing out an explanation of the addition of fractions with unlike denominators...;-)]
- Focus your praise on your child's real effort, not on your child being “smart.” Regarding praise, it's not clear how anyone (kid or adult) can be “smart,” but it is clear to just about everyone how to “work hard.” Too often we Americans think talent is key to success, when the reality (from expert cognitive science research work) is that repeated deliberate practice, thinking hard about how to do something better as you do it, is what improves performance. It's the effort that makes all the difference.
- Help your kids practice certain skills to the point they don't have to think about them. All experts have certain things mastered to a subconscious level—the ability to complete a task without verbal thinking—and the only way to do that is through practice, practice, practice. That shouldn't be—at K¹², it won't be—the whole learning diet. Conceptual understanding is a core foundation for complex problem solving in any domain. But certain elements really have to be mastered to fluency through repeated practice.
 - Help your middle school and high school age kids find something they really love, and encourage them to be crazy about it. Students don't have to be great at it right this second—that's what the deliberate practice is for; they just have to *love* it. Kids who have an interest, no matter what it is or how good they are, turn out to pull everything along behind them: personal lives, interactions with family, academic success. Arts, hobbies, athletics, or academics—anything they think about, dream about, deliberately practice (have I said that before?)—is great.
- Adolescent minds deconstruct, and then reconstruct. An 8-year-old who seemed pretty organized can easily become a distracted 12-year-old. Don't get mad or worried, or communicate that your kid is “bad” because this neuronal rebuilding is under way. Patience is key—and I don't mean just “waiting it out.” Keep modeling and explaining how to get organized and how to prioritize and, best of all, do it clearly and visibly yourself, until that young mind is rebuilt enough to bring those functions back on line.

So, the short version for student (and your) success: Slow down, talk more in the right way, sleep more, have your kids find something interesting that they like to do, and have them deliberately think about what they're doing before and while they practice it—and practice it a lot.

All these steps, taken together, line up with cognitive science research on how to improve learning performance—and can help you feel a bit less like your world is spinning around you!



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xPotential

\ ek-sp -'ten(t)-sh -l \ n (2007)

1: the innate “possibility factor” unique to every child < hard work and the right education can unlock and completely develop a child’s ~ >

2: LIFE PROMISE; LIFE

POSSIBILITY **3:** the personal,

visceral and intellectual zenith that a child can reach

by immersing herself in the passionate combination

of cognitive science,

individualized learning

approaches, and rich,

engaging content found in

the K¹² curriculum.

We want to hear
from you!

E-mail feedback and
article ideas to

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unleash the xPotential





Back to School And Ready to Write

By John Holdren, K12's senior vice president for content and curriculum

In his capacity as K12's chief learning officer, my colleague and friend Bror Saxberg posts many thoughtful entries on "Bror's Blog" (communitychest.k12.com/blog). In response to one of his recent posts, a student wrote to ask, "If you were in my shoes, how would you start to develop your writing? What first steps would you take to have a work published? (I'm attempting to write a book, big undertaking I know!!!) What do you think are some of the key things to writing an entertaining and engaging work?"

Bror asked me to respond, since I've spent many years teaching writing as well as writing for various publications. Given that it's back-to-school time, I thought I'd share my advice to that aspiring young writer, since many a K12 student will soon be picking up a pen or launching a word processing program.

One important key to becoming a strong writer is to read a lot. Read often and attentively. Notice how your favorite writers use words and craft the language. Experiment with imitating passages by your favorite writers.

To become a good writer, you have to write—a lot. Like any skill, writing requires repeated practice to do well. The Victorian novelist Anthony Trollope rose daily at 5:30 and wrote until 11 a.m. In those hours, he wrote some 3,000 words, after which he headed to his job at the post office. By this means he produced 47 novels, as well as numerous biographies, travel books, and sketches. To improve at writing, you must write regularly and often—though maybe not as much as Anthony Trollope.

Order your writing to

others and encourage their honest response. Praise might make you feel good, but constructive criticism will help you improve. You have to be willing to listen to what others tell you, even if it stings a little.

Writing is rewriting. As the modern British writer E.M. Forster put it, "How can I tell what I think till I see what I say?" Because we all tend to like what we write, it helps to get some distance from your first draft. Set it aside for a few days, and then look at it with fresh eyes. More than likely, you'll find that what you thought was inspired and brilliant turns out to be rough and clunky. But at least now you can see what needs work.

It's not easy to throw out whole

paragraphs or even pages, but if you want to be a good writer, then you have to be your own most demanding reader. It's worth repeating—writing is rewriting.

If you aspire to be published, think about your purpose and audience. Ask, "Why am I writing? To inform, explain, entertain, persuade, analyze, reflect, etc.? To whom am I writing? What do I know about my readers?"

Keep in mind that writing is not talking to yourself on paper, but engaging in a transaction with others—with an audience. A letter to the editor, a short story, a book review, a humorous sketch—each serves a different purpose, and for each the writer needs to anticipate the audience's expectations and questions, and accordingly adjust the content, design, voice, and other qualities of his or her writing.

These days, you can always publish yourself in a blog on the Web. But if you want to be published the old-fashioned way—in a book or magazine—then take to heart the old saying, "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again." Most writers are told "no" a lot more than "yes." The ones who get published are the ones who don't get discouraged, but use the "no's" to improve their work.

You might also find great pleasure in keeping your writings around—a year from now, two years from now, five years from now, turn back and enjoy how much progress you've made as you practice to improve!



Taking a Stand Against Cancer

Thousands of K¹² students and their families came together on one special weekend this summer—Sat., May 31, through Sun., June 1—to raise money for Alex's Lemonade Stand Foundation in the fight against pediatric cancer.

With more than 1,850 lemonade stands across the country and some as far away as Dubai, members of the K¹² family honored the memory of Alex Scott, the young cancer victim whose lemonade stands have contributed millions toward a cure for childhood cancer, by raising more than \$70,000 for the cause.

Thanks, everyone, for your help. And thank you, Alex, for reminding us what it means to give!



The Leembruggen Family

GOODWILL
AMBASSADORS



Parents Melissa and Oliver; Madelyn, 12; Nathaniel, 9; Jameson, 6

When Melissa Leembruggen heard about the plight of starving refugees in the Darfur region of Sudan, she marshaled her family and decided to see what they could do to help the struggling African nation.

In 2007, the Leembruggen family visited 26 states, educating people about the hardships facing Sudanese citizens after more than 21 years of civil war. More than 2 million refugees face malnutrition, polluted drinking water, dangerous living conditions, and little education.

The family says it intends to offer hope to the school groups and library patrons who attend its educational programs by showing kids how they can help make Sudan a safer, healthier place.

"I heard about what was going on [in Darfur], and my heart just broke. I felt I needed to do something to help," says Melissa, who wrote a book, based on the experiences of several people who visited the Darfur region, called *The Sudan Project: Rebuilding with the People of Darfur—A Young Person's Guide*.

"It's pretty cool" to travel the country and help Sudanese refugees, says her daughter, Madelyn, 12. Madelyn and her brothers are able to travel while keeping up with their studies through programs provided by the Ohio Virtual Academy.

The Leembruggens chose virtual schooling after years of traditional home schooling, in part because it offered curricula outside of Melissa's expertise and included built-in lesson plans.

"One of the things that appealed to me was to have a mental break from planning," Melissa says. "I would always want to go too far into planning, and then I would get frustrated when we couldn't get every single thing that I had planned done. Or I would pull back and not do enough," she explains. "To have a neutral party to say, 'This is what you're supposed to do this day,' or 'Here are a few extra things if you have extra time,' has taken a lot of mental stress off of me to make sure [the children] are getting what they need."

The lesson plans also enable her husband, Oliver, an aerospace engineer, to help out. "He has taken a larger and more active role in the process," Melissa says. "Because [lesson instructions are] right there on the computer, I can just pull it up and walk him through it." At the end of the day, "if somebody's not quite done, [Oliver] will jump in and help."

Brothers Nathaniel, 9, and Jameson, 6, enjoy the autonomy that comes with their individualized curriculum. "When I home schooled, the boys were always doing the same curriculum except for math and reading," says Melissa. "They're finding it interesting to have their own subjects and topics."

Even when traveling, the children can continue with their studies. "We can access [assignments] through the computer and print our worksheets as needed," Melissa says. "We also sometimes take our work [with us] when I am speaking and then hang out during a break at a coffee shop or somewhere with Internet access nearby to complete some lessons for that day."

The Leembruggens have done a lot of goodwill on behalf of the Sudanese people, despite having never visited the country. Virtual school will one day allow them to fulfill that dream and strengthen their family bond. "That's probably the main benefit of [virtual] education—seeing our family come together," says Melissa. "We've been able to find a lot more closeness in our relationship."

Home:

Beavercreek, Ohio

Virtual School:

Ohio Virtual Academy

Pets:

Tropical fish

Favorite Family Dinner:

Pizza or nachos

Favorite Family Movies:

Robots and *Enchanted*

Favorite Books:

Magic Tree House, *Grandma Summer*,
The Chronicles of Narnia, *Eragon*

History Day

History repeating itself seems

to be a good thing for Arizona Virtual Academy (AZVA) students. Not only do they know their history inside and out, but they repeatedly have won National History Day (NHD) competitions.

In the past three years, AZVA students have garnered 15 awards in the annual NHD contest, which draws some 500,000 student participants.

Each year, NHD organizers choose a contest theme. Students then choose a related theme based on a historical topic. This year's theme: "Conflict and Compromise."

Participants present their work as original papers, exhibits, or performances and documentaries. Student projects are presented at local and state competitions and evaluated by professional historians and educators. The program concludes with a national competition each June at the University of Maryland, College Park.

This year, AZVA students captured state and national awards.

Middle school students Christian Medrano and Kyle Curtis, who competed in the junior division, won a national award for their project, "Conflict and Compromise of the Mexican-American War." The pair also won first place at the state competition.

Danielle Medrano, Shandi Maghran, and Laynie Loper, also middle school students, won first place at the state competition and also received an award for "Best Entry in Central Arizona History." Their group performance topic was "Conflict and Compromise of Women's Suffrage in Arizona."

Matt Curtis placed third in the state

competition for his documentary on the Apache War. Kateri Hitchcock, a high school student, teamed up with a former AZVA student and won first place at the state competition and awards for "Best Use of Archives" and "Best Western History." The title of their documentary: "Delph Carpenter: The Master of Conflict and Compromise."

According to Mary Reed, AZVA's Advanced Learners Program mentor for the NHD contest, students spend 500 to 1,000 hours researching and working on their projects.

"It's basically the same kind of research a Ph.D. student has to go through," Reed says, adding, "in fact, one historian who worked with the students said he wished his graduate students were as good as these kids."

When Reed learned about the NHD program, she thought it would be a natural extension of K¹²'s composition requirements, where parents and students must select a theme that enables them to dive deep into the subject matter. Research for the NHD program includes fieldwork digging through original archives, papers, photographs, and documents.

"I thought the NHD research would be a great extension of the K¹² composition units... something the students could work on during the entire school year, so I decided to apply the K¹² curriculum to the contest," explains Reed.

She is proud of how her students, a diverse and well-rounded group, per-

formed. The common thread was strong interest in history, and the students knew their stuff.

Reed recalls setting up a training session for students who wanted to do a film documentary. "I quickly learned that they knew more than me, and I just got out of their way!" she says. "They just took over and showed me all the things I didn't know."

Next year, students will again participate in the NHD event, and if history is to repeat itself, expect AZVA students to continue their winning ways.



National History Day winners and participants pay a visit to K¹² headquarters. From top, left to right: Kateri Hitchcock, Christian Medrano, Shandi Maghran, Laynie Loper. Bottom, left to right: Kyle Curtis, Danielle Medrano, and Matt Curtis.

Symphony of nng

K¹² understands that it takes parents and teachers working in concert to create educational harmony. Here are some tips to help you and your teacher make beautiful music together.

Know Your Partners

Like any great band or orchestra, you need to be comfortable with the people you'll be playing with—and that includes your student's teacher. One of the surprising advantages of the virtual model is that you will be able to form a one-to-one relationship with your teachers like never before.

"I've always found that the best way for the child to be successful and to have good experiences is to have that open line of communication with the family," says Agora veteran elementary teacher Holly Fiore.

Getting to know each other is critical to establishing that strong line of communication. If your school offers the opportunity to meet face-to-face with your teacher during the school year, make sure you take it. And don't be shy about sharing your student's interests, both academic and extracurricular. Doing so

can foster that connection between your student and teacher and help avoid the "cat got your tongue" phenomenon during teacher check-ins.

When it comes time to chat with your teacher on the phone about your student's performance, make sure you are in a place where you can focus. Write down a list of questions you want to ask. Plan ahead and think about topics that were more difficult for you to help your student understand. Ask your student if there is anything he or she thinks should be talked about.

Follow Your Conductor

Just as a symphony has several moving parts, the school year has phases, and you will find that your teacher can provide different types of guidance throughout.

Academically, your teacher knows what your child should be learning and is capable of doing at his or her grade level. Depending on where you are in the country, your student might be required to meet specific standards in order to perform well on state tests. Your teacher can help you develop a plan to stay on track.

If you're having trouble with multiplication tables or slogging through a lesson on Shakespeare, pick up the phone and call your teacher, or fire off an e-mail. Keep abreast of the Illuminate sessions, office hours, tutoring hours, and other services your teacher offers and take advantage of them. Don't make the mistake of limiting your questions to scheduled conference calls. Tapping into your teacher's experience sooner, rather than later, can help dramatically when facing challenging material.

Let your teacher know if there's a life event or situation that may be temporarily affecting your student and/or your family's schedule and ability to keep up with your academic plan. Your teacher will be able to help you come up with strategies to minimize any negative impact, and will want to be able to offer the extra support and encouragement you and your child need.

"You really are in this as a partnership," says Georgia Virtual Academy Master Teacher Kelly Morando of her relationship with parents. "I'm not here as a certified teacher to tell parents what they are doing wrong or to be looking over their shoulder. I'm here to help them educate their children in the best way possible."

Play It to Perfection

A teacher's knowledge, coupled with a parent's or learning coach's understanding of a student's personality, is what makes it possible to create a learning experience tailored to the individual needs of every student.

K¹²'s curriculum contains several activities and lessons for every topic area—so many that most families don't have time to do them all. But, by working with your teacher, you can hand-pick activities within the lesson that will help your student achieve mastery.

Teachers and parents should work together to create a list of goals and expectations for the student. Together, they can act as cheerleaders for one another, offering praise and feedback and striking the right notes to create an educational experience worthy of a standing ovation.