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Today we take a trip into Paul Solarz's student centered classroom. He's the author of learn like a pirate and this is episode 73.

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VICKI: It's wonderful Wednesday and we're traveling into a wonderful classroom, 5th grade classroom of Paul Solarz [@PaulSolarz](#) where he's been teaching since 1999 in Illinois. He's also author of the amazing book, Learn Like a Pirate. <http://amzn.to/2pyNkSk> So Paul, tell us something that makes your classroom so wonderful.

PAUL: Absolutely, first of all, thank you so much for having me on. The thing I advocate the most for I think is just a student-centered classroom where kids have leadership opportunities, that they can make decisions throughout their day, collaboration being a big key – all that kind of goes together. But my big focus is trying to give kids the power to make decisions freely and think for themselves rather than always rely on the adult in the room to try to tell them what to think, how to think and what to do, that sort of thing. So my kids at this point of the year – we're in April – they're kind of leading the show. I had a substitute for part of the morning this morning and the kids did everything.

So that's the goal.

VICKI: Okay. So you say they're leading the show. In what ways do they lead the show in your fifth grade classroom?

PAUL: I have the schedule put up on the board. You know, I keep my kids all day long. So they get in an 9:05 or 8:55 or so, they turn on the morning announcement, we do video announcements, they take attendance, they make sure everybody is checked in so that the attendance is accurate. They get up with supplies that we need, if we start with the computer card, they go and get the computer card and it's all through symbols and color coding on the schedule that tells them what to do and when to do it.

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They make those decisions because they know what to look for. We've set up rituals and routines that they know how to follow. We have assigned jobs in our classroom where kids are in charge of things, but yet, nobody is responsible for their own job, only anybody can do anyone's job. It's just the person's job to make sure it gets done. So if someone else has already done it, they're set, if it hasn't been done they either have to ask someone to do it or do it themselves. So typically, whoever sees the schedule first starts making the decisions, switches off every day who does it, it's not decided by me.

And as the day goes on they see that we're coming close to a transition time, they'll do a give-me-five which is our callout for getting everyone's attention. When they say "give me five, give me five" we all have to stop what we're doing and listen, including me if I'm in a conversation with an adult I typically would stop unless it's something that I can't really stop.

I'll listen to the announcement and I'll make the decision to transition or whatever it is that we need to do. And this is done throughout the day and then we end the day with what we called **REARJMCL** (see <http://psolarz.weebly.com/rearjmcl.html>) which is an acronym for our end of the day routine which involves going over what we did for the day, maybe writing down if we have any homework or classwork that wasn't finished, evaluating our day. We actually set a whole class goal for ourselves for the next day to follow.

We evaluate how the day went according to old goals that we've either struggled with or old goals that are recent that we want to focus on. They do that all by themselves around the big center table that they all gather around together. It looks like a big committee that works on their own. And I don't have a natural role during this other than to give feedback and observe. So that's kind of what I do, I just sit back and if I have something to say I raise my hand and I contribute. But otherwise they take care of everything. And they're at the stage of the year where they're so confident in their jobs that they're asking, "who would like to learn this job today? I'll sit next to you and you can be the evaluator and you can be the re-capper. And the other person will run it with the aid of the person whose job it actually is."

VICKI: Paul, it's so overwhelming because it's like how long did it take you to get your students to this point?

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PAUL: So I could ask that a lot. It's definitely a continuum. I see some really great progress after the second week which sounds crazy early, it is. But after about two weeks my kids kind of get an idea of what's going on. And then the whole year is definitely – you know you see some peaks and valleys. And one of our goals this year was not to revert after Christmas break, winter break, spring break kind of thing because they'll have the tendency to go away for two weeks and forget everything we know.

VICKI: Yep.

PAUL: But you have those peaks and valleys and I'm telling you – I think right after spring break was where I said, "Wow, this is it for this year", I don't have to come to school again this year other than **content instruction**. That's pretty much my only purpose at this point because even the feedback is kind of limited. I don't have that much I need to tell them.

VICKI: So what is your role?

PAUL: Well my role really is always to participate, observe, discuss, give feedback. I know my kids really well at this point and so the things that I haven't been able to get to them about – just little things throughout the year that I probably needed to work on with them I'm starting to work on better now because I have so much more time available in my day. For example, today, one of my kiddos wrote a goal on the board and it's one of those homonyms that he's been spelling wrong all year.

So I said, all right, let's work on that homonym, work on the things that they've done incorrectly that I haven't gotten to because it wasn't a priority and make it a priority.

VICKI: So Paul, for example, what does a student-led math lesson look like?

PAUL: So I always like to point out a point for clarification for everybody is that my room is not necessarily student-led, let my students are constantly standing in front of the entire class teaching a content area lesson. That's not typically the way things work. I usually still give any kind of content instruction that needs to be done. However, my students are very good at teaching many lessons and many lessons are more like technology issues or procedural issues or tips and tricks that they've discovered for something that we're working on, maybe good websites that they can use or something like that.

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So typically math might look more traditional than some other subjects but at the same time I still think that it's actually fairly unique in that we walk into class, my students divide up in to, basically, two groups. They get working on some independent practice and I work one on one with kids who are sitting in line working on their independent practice waiting for me. And I give them feedback on the work that they finished the previous day either in class or at home.

And then I'll teach a lesson after I get through all the students and we'll partner them up and they'll work together on the actual activities where I walk around and give feedback. They may not be able to move on to the next activity without checking in with me, I'll let them know what they're having trouble with, re-teach anything that I need, sometimes pull the whole group back together and then move on from there. So it's somewhat unique but somewhat traditional looking as well.

VICKI: Okay. So what's the most nontraditional subject and what does that look like?

PAUL: That's a good question. Since and social studies is definitely where my students will shine the most as far as taking leadership roles as on however any point in the day whenever we're transitioning or any point in the day if the phone rings they answer it, if the person walk in they welcome them. Things like that. But science and social studies, you know, my kids – I typically will partner them up, get them working collaboratively, give them the directions on the activity by

posting it on the website, projecting it in class, going through each step, saying this is what you need to accomplish. They usually have some sort of hands-on component. It's not usually research-based but it involves looking things up occasionally to clarify. But usually, like, maybe they do an experiment or maybe they build something.

They may take pictures or videos, they put it on their e-portfolio and have some reflection questions. I put it onto our blog. Each kid has their own portfolio and they upload everything there. It kind of takes them through a process of learning with discovery with reflection for deeper understanding. And then I give them feedback based on their final reflections and their videos and their photos that they've created.

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And then they may have to revise the day later or a week later, even. Sometimes even longer than that. But that's our typical routine, kids will just at any point in time get up and do give-me-fives, they'll be walking around and saying, "You guys, I just discovered this" or "if anybody wants to come over to the corner, I'm going to teach a quick mini lesson on how to upload this with an embedded code." You know, they'll do that spontaneously on their own. If they don't do it on their own they might ask me a question and I might say, "hey, why don't do that as a give me five and offer that to others?"

That's the gist of how we do it throughout the year.

VICKI: There's so much we can learn. And you can see why Paul had to write a book. It's Learn Like a Pirate. And I'm sitting here going, you know what, I need to re-read this book because I think I work way too hard. It's not the time of the year when I go, "wow, they don't need me anymore." I wish it was, though. I wish it was.

Paul, let me just ask you one more question, though, as we finish. What's the hardest thing about teaching this way?

PAUL: It's a really good question. I think people will think that my answer would be something like getting parents and administrators to accept it, but that's not the case. They've all looked at me as though it's a strange different way and they have some skepticism. But they all find out by the end of the year how well it works, they're pretty proud of it. So I really don't know that there's anything that's that hard. It's just I know that I have to keep up on the feedback. And I have more time to give feedback but I have a tendency to fulfill that time with creating more lessons that are more engaging.

It's a vicious spiral where I use that time like I probably should to just be giving feedback to kids like I should. I often use it to build even bigger things. So I think getting to kids in a timely manner with feedback is always my challenge and I think I do a good job of it. I just know I can do a way better job if I just focused a little bit more.

- VICKI: I know. Because it's like the fun is in the lessons of the teaching and the feedback – I mean, it's not that it's horrible, it's just that it's just not as exciting because we're not face-to-face with the kids necessarily, you know?
- PAUL: Exactly right.
- VICKI: Okay. So the book is Learn Like a Pirate. Paul has agreed to let us...-

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