

*This is a transcript of the T/TAC William and Mary podcast “Ron Nash: From Seat Work to Feet Work”.*

**[MUSIC: T/TAC William and Mary Podcast Intro]**

**Sue LAND:** Today I’m talking to Ron Nash, who has just finished delivering a wonderful keynote speech at our 22<sup>nd</sup> annual symposium on Professional Collaboration and Inclusive Education. And so, Ron’s title of his talk, or presentation, was, uh, *The Active Classroom: From Seat Work to Feet Work*. And I have to say, uh, that you had us... not on our seats long, and up and enjoying, and learning about what it means to be, uh, a teacher who employs active learning strategies in his or her classroom. Some of the things I saw, and what really touched me, was the piece around relationship building. And so, if I was a teacher that wanted to really make my classroom more active, and I wanted to go back on Monday and do some of the things that you had us doing, what tips would you give that teacher

**Ron NASH:** I would say the first thing is, before you go back to content, if what you want to do is create a more active classroom, deal with process for two or three days. That’s going to be difficult to do because of the pressure to keep into the content. But if you want students to learn, they have to wrestle with the alligator. I call it wrestling with the alligator; by any other name, it is simply that they have to have conversations and dialogues with each other as they process the information that they have just received, or they process information from a film that they just saw, or a film clip that they just saw. *They* have to do the doing. And I would say the first thing is to get those kids up and get them first working in pairs, teach them to work in pairs, face each other, and actually have a conversation, which is very difficult, especially at the middle and high school levels, Sue, there’s used to staring at a screen for seven to nine hours a day, sometimes til two or three o’clock in the morning. And when they’re doing that, they’re not having the face-to-face conversations that many of us had when we were growing up, and so where are they going to have those conversations? They have to do it in the classroom. First thing they have to understand is body language, how to stand and face another person and actually have a conversation. Second thing is, they have to understand what listening is all about. We say things to students like ‘pay attention’ or ‘listen carefully’, and what we really mean in many cases is just, ‘sit up straight and don’t cause me problems’. But if we truly want those kids to learn how to listen, and that’s critical to the jobs they’re gonna have someday, they have to understand what listening is, they have to understand what body language and facial expressions, the effect that those things have on other people when you’re standing in front of someone, the effect that looking at your watch or looking at the clock or seeing somebody else in the room and waving or letting other things distract you as this poor person who’s talking with you is trying to have a conversation with you. And so I would say the first thing is deal with process. Pairs, then from pairs you can move into quartets, and I wouldn’t go any higher than groups of six in middle or high school, I’d stay with the quartets, groups of four, and do it that way. The other thing is I would use music in the classroom, music releases neurotransmitters, movement releases

neurotransmitters. If you combine the two, what's happening is that you're setting those kids up for learner. So, for example, let's say you want your kids to stand and have a conversation about something they just heard or something they just saw or something they just read. Then use thirty seconds worth of music to get them up. For example, 'Walking on Sunshine' by Aly & AJ is a great song to get them up and moving. It's upbeat, you want upbeat music to do that, and it gives them a chance to just, to just groove to wherever they're gonna go and have that conversation. And they're standing around the room in the pairs, and then you have them move into the quartets, and the first conversations they have during the day or two when you're doing this is about themselves. Don't ask them to talk about content; they haven't done that. Have them talk about themselves, their favorite vacations, their favorite movies, their favorite books, their favorite video games, their favorite animals, whatever it is, have the conversation with another person. And teach them, I would say, during those two days, to do two things that say that you're listening. One, summarize. So after you're done talking you, you and I together as a pair, then I would say, 'So—', and I would simply summarize what you're saying. Or, after you're done talking, I might say, 'You know, Sue, you mentioned thus-and-so, tell me more'. In both those cases, with paraphrasing and summarizing is a form of paraphrasing, and with asking for point of clarification, both those things send four critical messages to people. One, is that I'm listening. Two, is that I understand your thinking, or at least I'm trying to understand your thinking. And the fourth thing is, I care about your thinking. This is quite a concept. Uh, because when you're facing another human being and you're having these conversations, you have to convey that you're listening, that you care, you wanna hear what the other person has to say, and when you summarize or paraphrase and you ask for a point of clarification, you're honoring that person.

**LAND:** So I'm gonna pretend I'm a skeptical teacher. And I've been listening to you, and I've been doing your activities during a professional development activity. And now I'm thinking, 'I've gotta get back in the classroom. I've got that content to cover. All this stuff that Ron has us doing takes time away from my teaching of the content'. So, what might you say to that teacher?

**NASH:** Well, it has less to do with your teaching of the content, then with your learning of the content. If what you want is for them to truly learn what you're doing, and I just had a conversation in the parking lot with somebody, and what my suggestion, in U.S. History, in the conversation was cover less, let them drill deeper. Go deeper into the information. Let them have the conversations. Build it around themes, like conflict, immigration, all of those, uh, civil rights, and you can, instead of going through U.S. History, for example, lock-step, from one chapter to the next, trying to cover everything—you can't cover everything. Every teacher has the same problem, cause there's so much stuff that teachers feel they have to convey that they can barely get over it, that sometimes they're not concerned about whether students learn it—that's what we have to be concerned about. Did they learn the information? Do they have the skills to succeed in the twenty-first century? You know, it may be less important for them to know when the Battle of Gettysburg, then it is to be able to have a conversation in a job someday where that's important. Or to be able to do some critical thinking, because that's important. To be able to

collaborate in teams, because that's important. If you think about a typical high school, the bell rings and you go someplace, the bell rings and you stop, the bell rings and you start, the bell rings and you go to lunch, the bell rings and you go home, and we march lock-step through the curriculum. Kids go from English, and then they go over to this thing called History, and then they go to this thing called Science, they go to this thing called Math... Life isn't like that. And if what we want is for these kids to truly learn, then they have to be able to use the same skills in each classroom. If they're in a History classroom, they need to be able to ask questions, not be afraid of that.

**LAND:** So, do teachers need formal training, do you think, in cooperative learning groups, such as Johnson & Johnson's work? Sometimes I think that's daunting to teachers... Is there an easier way to get them to start putting their kids into groups?

**NASH:** I would start with pairs first. Here's the neat thing about a pair, if you think about this. You can hide in a group. You're right there. Like, there's no way, I can't go anywhere, you're right here. So you train them to work, to work in pairs. And you train them to listen so that they understand what listening means. When I'm truly listening, how do I listen to another human being? And, then, once you've conquered that, and you've got the kids doing that, then I would say, more often than not, if they can work in pairs seated, get them up, they can do it standing. Let them take their notes with them. Whatever it is they can do seated normally, they can do standing. That's the other tip that I would give to teachers is in your classroom there's something called press, release. If you're going to lecture for ten minutes, there's nothing wrong with that. But be aware that especially in middle school and high school, after ten minutes those people are going to a better place in their minds (laughs). They've learned to look at us and smile, and even give us a thumbs-up like we're doing great things, and we misread them. We think, 'oh, everybody's with me'. No, they're not with you. So, ten minutes of lecture needs to be followed by five, or six, or seven, or even ten minutes of letting them wrestle with the alligator, take their notes, have a conversation, as you walk around the room, as a teacher, and listen to what they're doing. And *then* you can do ten more minutes of something else, and then ten minutes of, so it's press, release, press, release. When I first started teaching, and I can't speak for anybody who's listening to this, and maybe they don't do this, but what I used to do is lecture for a long period of time. And my kids learned to look at me, and they liked me, and I told jokes, and they smiled, and I thought, 'oh, I'm an entertainer', and then my test results came back. And then I learned later on that I really wasn't connecting with these, these, uh, with these kids. So, going back to the tips. Number one, spend a couple days on process. Number two, if you want these kids to, to learn and speak and work in groups, start with pairs, then move to quartets. They can be seated, they can be standing, doesn't matter, but you alternate that as they, as they're, as they work their way through that. Many teachers are afraid of having the kids move because it's a control thing. I sometimes, uh, teachers are too into power, and I was when I first started teaching, I was into power. And a good friend of mine has a saying, that we're too much in love with the influence of power, and we ought a be in love with the power of influence. So as teachers, we can *influence*

the kids, we can *influence* their behavior, we can *influence* their learning. We can work as facilitators of process, as they work their way through asking questions, dealing with problems, and otherwise learning deeply, rather than trying to cover the curriculum. And it frightens teachers, it really does, because word comes from on high that we have to cover all this. Well, we have to make a decision. Do we want kids to learn and come out with the skills they need? Or do we want to cover the material?

**LAND:** So you really are talking about looking at the critical content and what is it in that content that all students need to know (right) and learn. You don't need to know the entire textbook, but what are those critical concepts and skills (right)?

**NASH:** Right. Teachers can sit down and work together on common testing, whether it's normative or formative, and work, and then compare how their kids do. They have to be willing to take a risk there, because you have to be willing to say, 'I'm not doing as well as you, help me'. Or, 'I'm not doing as well as you, let's talk'. Or, 'how do you teach this? I'm not having as much success with that, as you can see, let's work together'. So I think collaboration is a key skill that has to be present not only with teachers, but with the students. And the students have to see within the school that the teachers are modeling these collaborative efforts. And every time I ask adults to share who their favorite teacher was, you hear things like compassion, you hear things like 'they cared about me'. Begin to look for the strengths that your students have. We can't beat them to death with their weaknesses. What we have to do is take their strengths and help them, cause that's where they're going to make a living someday, that's where they're going to be happiest someday, that's just the way, that's *life*, you know, it's not rocket science, it's just, when you have thirty kids in your elementary classroom, or you have a hundred and twenty kids in your middle school, you have to begin on day one to figure out what makes them tick, and how can I help that kid, and how can I have conversations with them? You talked about building relationships. The first thing is to find out what makes these kids tick.

**LAND:** Really looking at their strengths and feeding into the strengths to help them learn the content that might not be as easy for them to learn (yep). And so, a lot of the things that you've touched on about the building of relationships, finding out students' strengths, is really about creating learning communities in your classroom (right). And I know that's a big thing now with teachers, professional learning communities, yet we don't have that in our classrooms.

**NASH:** Well, here's, here's my thought about that—very often we label things. Here's, here's what I suggest to administrators working with teachers, or teachers working with students. You can build a learning community without calling it anything. You just begin to build relationships, and you have teachers work together, and you suggest that teachers do this, and that, and the other thing, and you ask them what they're doing, and then you have other teachers come in and observe people who are doing well with something, and you begin to build a learning community, not by fiat... There are two things that will have teachers running for the door: fire and change. You know, if the word comes down, the first day of school, the principal comes up

and says, 'Alright, everybody. Don't be afraid, I don't want you to be afraid, but let me tell you what's coming from central office. We're going to have a major push for continuous improvement. Now, don't be afraid, we're going to do this a little at a time, I'm telling you right now it's going to be fine'. That's what you said. Here's what the teachers heard: 'Alright, everybody. We're going to change everything you do in your classroom tomorrow'. That's what they hear. That's what they hear, and it frightens the beejaybers out of them. People like their beejaybers, so they don't like to have it frightened out of them. And so I would just say, to any school interested in continuous improvement, and to any classroom, is you can build a learning community without giving everybody a hat that says 'we are a learning community', or putting up the flag that says 'we're a learning community', you just *do* it. Do what you have to do, make it a great place to be, and everything else will follow. One of the most successful teacher's I know, in Virginia Beach, is one who the kids do eighty percent of the work. She models, they do. And they do it well. And... her kids pass a hundred percent of all the tests, and they love coming to school, and it's—it's just a great place to be. We interviewed them. I interviewed the kids and they said, 'Mr. Nash, it's like a family in here. We're family.' (That's quite a compliment.) Yeah. We're a family. And they'll admit that. These kids do beautifully. They take the tests in stride. Why? Because they love coming to school. Why? Because *she* takes the time to build the relationships, she takes the time to drill down into the material, and she does it right.

**LAND:** So during your presentation, and also just now, you talked about inclusive classrooms, and classrooms where there are students with disabilities, and that is really a focus of our center is to work teachers and teacher teams around improving outcomes for students with disabilities collaboratively and in general ed settings. So... can you speak to that a little bit?

**NASH:** I, I think so (laughs), and I'll use, I'll use this teacher as, uh, an example. When I—I've been in her classroom many times. I don't know who the special ed kids are. You got forty-eight kids. And you got maybe... fifteen special ed kids in there, and a whole bunch of ADHD, I don't know who they are. The reason I don't know who they are is because these kids are all up and moving, neurotransmitters are flowing, they *like* being there—now, that's an important concept—and they don't think they're any different than anyone else. If you can walk into a classroom and you don't know who the special ed kids are, that teacher's doing a good job. And you have to understand that many special ed kids are in there because they couldn't handle the auditory processes of a regular ed classroom. (That's all the class was) Lecture, if it's, if they're sitting there and it's lecture and they have to sit for fifty minutes, they can't handle that. *I* can't handle that.

**LAND:** So you've got kids up, up and moving; you've got kids talking to each other (absolutely); you have music going; and you have them interacting with the content in little, little chunks.

**NASH:** Plays. In that class they do plays, they, they write plays, they perform plays, and I didn't mention this today, but they have an alpha grid on the floor. And what the kids do is they line up

around the alpha grid, and you, picture if you will, a hopscotch arrangement, with a-e-i-o and u up here, and down here there are twice the letters, mixed up twice on there. And then the other consonants are there, and what the kids do is they'll take a word, the word is 'receive'. And all the kids are standing around this thing, and the kid goes to 'r', and everybody shouts 'r' and points to 'r'. 'E', 'e' and goes to 'e', and so forth through the thing, and then somebody else comes up to the head and they do this. Her spelling quizzes went from fives and sixes to tens. And the kids love it, kids love it. They also have a number grid—one to a hundred number grid. And the kids go on there and do a game called 'Twister'. She'll have all the kids on, she'll, 'Okay, everybody, put your left foot on a composite number. Put your right foot on an even number'. And these kids are all twisted all over the thing, but, and she's watching to see how they're doing, and they love it. And they learn. And a hundred percent of kids pass math. Here's, here's the thing about testing: if you do the right things in the classroom, if the kids love you and they love being there, if the kids feel that you respect them, if the kids respect each other, if you won't let sarcasm live in your classroom, if you have high expectations, then it doesn't matter. Let the kids take care of the test. Too many teachers think they have to take care of the test. And when they think they have to take care of the test, that's when they spoon feed all this... stuff, you know, and content, and—and, um, 'this'll be on the test, so you have to know this', to me it's insanity. Let the kids take care of the—do the things in the classroom where the kids are active, they love coming to school every day. First thing that'll happen, I guarantee it, this—this teacher hasn't written a referral in five years.

**LAND:** So the behavior (Five years.) problems are decreased (sure) with good instruction (right) and active learning going on (yup). Well, is there any last tidbit of wisdom that you can impart before we say goodbye?

**NASH:** If I'm talking to teachers, what I would tell them is, I, I often put this on a chart, two words: try things. You know, they've been teaching for twenty-five years, and they have it down. There's a certain routine, and they fit the kids into the routine. First of all, that's boring for teachers. And it's boring for students, in many cases, so I would say try things, try getting them to work in pairs, try getting them to work in quartets, make sure that they get to move, try doing something different every ten minutes or so, and build those relationships, and always look to the kids, always look for what it is that makes them tick, and then you can do extensions. You can extend your learning if you know that Fred over here loves to write, then one of the things you can do with Fred is give him the opportunity to write, and it doesn't have to be graded. The other hint I would give to people is: less summative assessment, more formative assessment. What the kids need is feedback. They don't need grades; they need feedback. Now, you have to give grades, that's the way it is, but on the way to the grade, the more formative feedback you give, then the better the grades will be. And the grades will take care of themselves. If the teacher takes care of the classroom process, kids will take care of the tests—and they'll be glad to do it.

**LAND:** Ron, I really appreciate this conversation—

**NASH:** Well, it's my pleasure.

**LAND:** And it was awesome having you at the symposium—

**NASH:** Thank you, it was my pleasure being here, what a great group of teachers, I tell you, there was a lot of energy in that room. And there was someone visiting from out-of-state, and said that you really seem to have your act together here, so I would complement *all* of you in the job that you're doing here at William & Mary through the T/TAC program, and I would say keep up the good work, and give them their eighty.

**LAND:** Sounds good, thank you.

**[MUSIC: T/TAC William and Mary Podcast Outro]**