



## Rage Against The Machine, Professor Tells Teachers

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DURHAM, N.H. - Children should not be treated like mechanical widgets whose learning is driven by impersonal top-down mandates and tests. In his new book, Tom Newkirk, University of New Hampshire professor of English, defends teaching against the "cult of efficiency" that turns classrooms into mechanized assembly lines of knowledge.

"'Holding On to Good Ideas in a Time of Bad Ones' is for every teacher whose good, humane, and sensitive ways of teaching literacy are threatened by rigid, mechanical programs. It is for teachers who feel they are losing control of their daily work," Newkirk says.

"What I see happening is the mechanization of teaching. Teachers are told to teach to the test and pay more attention to research results than to their classroom experience. Instead of treating teachers like professionals capable of determining what is best for the individual learning styles of their students, we have created a system in which teachers and students are caught in a machine that they can't control. Ultimately this is counterproductive because teaching to the test is not learning and it puts kids in the humiliating situation of being in a punitive system," he says.

In his new book, Newkirk goes beyond diagnosing the problem to present six ideas worth fighting for. These transformative practices gently but firmly return instructional decisions to where they belong -- with our teachers. Newkirk shows how to:

- Increase the instructional emphasis on writing to reflect the reality that producing text is more important than ever.
- Help students access deep knowledge and expand their thinking through time to write freely.
- Build strong connections between school learning and the real world by teaching with popular culture.
- Propel the development of reading skills by helping students discover the pleasure of reading.
- Provide the time and space for meaningful, long-lasting teaching and learning by uncluttering the curriculum.
- Spark professional growth and avoid stagnation by discussing failure and uncertainty with colleagues.

"So much of the top-down micromanaging of teaching is terrible for teachers and students. It's been tried before and it hasn't worked. There is a role for state and federal government, but it's not in the day-to-day management of classroom teaching," Newkirk says.

Newkirk's book has been well-received by literacy educators and advocates.


"Lately, we teachers have been suffering through some truly bad times. But as Tom Newkirk observes in this brilliant and stirring book, we and our educational forbears have been fighting this battle for centuries. There is always a struggle to put children first, to honor knowledge over compliance, and to place humanity above the aims of the state. Newkirk's good news: today we have an extraordinary opportunity to get things right. Always one of the most distinctive and thoughtful voices in education, Newkirk asserts that no curriculum can ever work unless it fits on the back of an envelope. And then he offers his own envelope-sized curriculum for teaching writing, four questions and sixteen focal points. That's it. Classic Newkirk: direct, incisive, and brimming with wisdom," says Harvey "Smokey" Daniels, coauthor of "Comprehension & Collaboration."

"Rich with pedagogy and human enough to make you burst out laughing, Thomas Newkirk's thoughts made me feel both heartened and head-slapping awakened. This book is one of the best teacher books ever. I'll be giving copies of it to lots of teacher friends as we find our way back to trusting what we know about kids, about learning, and about teaching writing. The book is written for anyone who grapples with the modern quagmire: the chasm between why we became teachers and what schools have become. The discussions have already begun, and Thomas Newkirk's book will shed light and warmth where they're so sorely needed," said Gretchen Bernabei, author of "Reviving the Essay."

Tom Newkirk is a professor of English at the University of New Hampshire. He is the author and editor of a number of books, including "*Holding Onto Good Ideas in a Time of Bad Ones*" (2009), "*Teaching the Neglected 'R'*" (2007), and "*Misreading Masculinity*" (2004), which was cited by *Instructor Magazine* as one of the most significant books for teachers in the past decade. Newkirk is a former teacher of at-risk high school students in Boston, former director of UNH's freshman English program, and the director and founder of its New Hampshire Literacy Institutes. He has studied literacy learning at a variety of educational levels, from preschool to college.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 11,800 undergraduate and 2,400 graduate students.

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