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Centennial teachers employ new learning process

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UTICA – A lot of good things start with L: love, light, life.

In the classroom, starting with “L” is all right, but “J” is the place to end up.

At Centennial High School, English teachers Amy Hottovy and Stephanie Vorderstrasse are taking their classes “from L to J.”

The L to J process is a learning method developed by Dr. Lee Jenkins, a longtime educator currently in Arizona. L to J contends that in a classroom where learning standards are high, testing early in the school year should result in an “L” shape when student knowledge is charted. On the graph, the Y axis is the number of students; the X axis is how much they know.

The downstroke on the L indicates that a lot of kids don’t know much, and the short horizontal foot means that a few know something.

In the middle of the school year, testing should result in a classic “bell curve.” Picture the shape of a bell on the graph: after weeks of instruction, a few kids still don’t know much, most kids show average knowledge, and a few kids know a lot.

By the end of the year, a “J” should dominate the graph: all the kids know more than they did before, though a few kids still won’t know as much while most kids will know a lot.

Applied to the English classroom, the L to J process emphasizes students mastering a list of key concepts and terms by the end of the school year. Freshmen are expected to learn 155 new concepts, sophomores 100, juniors 133 and seniors 130.

At Centennial, L to J was implemented last year. At the beginning of this school year, the seniors, with one year of learning by the L to J process behind them, already knew 25 percent of the terms they are expected to know by the end of their senior year: anecdote, denouement, motif, transition, and more.

Students are provided with a list of the terms they must know by the end of the year. These are further broken down into a number they must know by the end of each quarter.

They are tested weekly on the terms and concepts that occur during regular classroom instruction and discussion, typically 11 terms. Definitions are provided; the students must be able to provide the term. Students chart their own progress; the teacher charts class progress.

Throughout the learning process, from first introduction through classroom discussion through testing, definitions are always worded the same. Students are responsible for learning them. One way Centennial English students do this is with old-fashioned flash cards.



News-Times/Kate Burke - Centennial High School seniors Phillip Beck, Jacob Wiemer and Kelsey Fehlhafer keep track of their own progress using the “L to J” learning process in teacher Amy Hottovy’s English classroom.

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Any time they encounter an L to J term, students fill out a flash card. They provide the term, write down the standardized definition, provide an example or a non-example, and draw a picture to illustrate the term.

They even rate their own understanding of it, on a scale of 1 to 4. As their learning progresses, their understanding of the term should increase.

The part Mrs. Hottovy likes the best?

"They don't have permission to forget," she says. "It builds through the year."

Students actually earn a grade for their L to J learning based on quarterly tests. Terms learned during Week 1 are just as important as those learned during Week 9. And spelling counts.

Throughout the process, students are aware of their own progress. They also have control over what they know and become more active in their own learning. They "compete against themselves," Mrs. Hottovy says.

They see the payoff in their own charts, moving from L to J.

"It's kind of fun to see their excitement," Mrs. Hottovy says.

She lets kids who have reached a personal high ring an old-fashioned school bell on her desk. Last year, she says, classes in adjoining rooms cheered when they heard the bell ring.

Centennial is investigating the possibility of applying the L to J process in all the core classes, English, math, science and social studies, in the middle and high schools. In the meantime, the English teachers don't mind being the school guinea pigs.

"I love it," Mrs. Hottovy says of L to J. "It has enhanced our discussions in class so much. And [students] come in and say, I heard a song that has irony in it, or whatever."

Jacob Wiemer, a senior in Mrs. Hottovy's class, says of the L to J terms, "You can use them. English papers, government papers...you can pretty much use them anywhere, like magazines."

His classmates Melanie Erks, Kelcie Schaubroeck, Jessica Schuelke and Rachel Knuth have elevated L to J to a friendly interpersonal competition. They try to beat each other at their personal highs, and claim victory in being the first girl to use the right term in the right context during class discussions.

"I think it'll help us in college," Kelcie says.

Melanie likes L to J because, she says, before this, "I never used to be able to apply 'smart' words in my writing."