

ONTASC

Celebrating Education, Innovation and the Human Spirit.

A personal perspective
by founder Abram Katz



Abram Katz helping a student frame his story concept.

ONTASC, an acronym for Organizing New Teaching Approaches in School Communities, is an innovative platform established by Abram Katz in 2012, to share what he calls 'heart-based learning.' It offers school-community partnerships to an enervated education system that has teachers and students wondering: What's next?

ONTASC provides innovative, socially relevant arts programs that allow students and teachers to connect in a meaningful way.

**"Everywhere, we learn only
from those
whom we love."**

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
(poet, novelist, playwright, diplomat.)

ONTASC addresses the inherent need in schools for both intra and interpersonal learning through creative writing and storytelling, provides technology training through media production classes, and brings out-of-the-box pedagogies to public and private schools. ONTASC programs encourage students to engage in the learning process, take ownership of their classroom, and speak their truths.

Imagine how much more effective educators could be if their primary focus was building meaningful re-

lationships with students? Since the best way to learn is through experience, Mr. Katz invites us to observe a typical middle school narrative writing class. "Don't be scared," he reassures, "Middle school is fun!"

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Day One

It's 9 a.m. in the morning. A school day. And another opportunity for me and my teaching interns to make a difference. We march into class, bursting with excitement and readiness. We nod to our partnering Language Arts teacher, who offers her best smile, and I address a room of 6th graders for the first time.

"Hi, my name is Mr. Katz, and I'm here to care about you." [extended silence]

A brave student voices the thoughts of many:
"That's weird."

"Why is it weird?" A leading query.

"Because it's different," she responds.

"Ah, it is different. We're going to be doing things a little differently in this class."

A quick glance to our partnering teacher. Oh good, she's still smiling.

"Before we get started writing stories, we have to begin building our classroom community; We have to establish a safe container for these important stories that we're going to write."

The students "gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes." (Maurice Sendak, Where the

Wild Things Are) My interns fidget a bit, but hold the line. Oh geez, why are they standing in formation like that? I should have reminded them to 'look casual.' I'll have to bring that up at our debrief.

"So," addressing the class again, "who are you guys? What are your interests? What's important to you? What did you have for breakfast?... I had fruit salad and sprouted bread. That's just the kind of man I am." [students laugh].

Okay, here we go...

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Day Four

Today our students have been asked to free-write about a challenge in their life. I gaze out on a sea of bobbing pencils, and notice one student dead-in-the-water. Her lifeless body collapsed on a wooden desk. She looks like a defeated journeyman, floating on a make-shift raft, waiting for the seabirds to peck her flesh to the bone. I remember feeling like that in school sometimes.

Motioning to the student, one of my interns asks me, "Are you going to go save her, Mr. Katz?"

"No, I'm going to listen to her." He gives me the universal did-you-really-just-go-there? look, eyebrows raised, head tilted, frozen in time. My non-response, a definitive, "Oh, you bet I did."

I walk over to Kathryn's desk, pull up a chair, and sit down. "Hey Kathryn, is this exercise too much right now?"



Students collaborating on their digital storytelling projects.

She nods her head, 'yes.' Kathryn is noticeably triggered by the assignment and is in an emotional holding pattern I refer to as 'lock-down.' Nobody in, nobody out. Safe from harm. As her teacher, I'm concerned that if she doesn't begin the writing process today, she may not have a topic for her digital storytelling project and, subsequently, will fall behind. Just looking at this scared little person, all I want to do is take off some of the pressure.

**"We bring out-of-the-box
teaching techniques into classrooms,
expanding opportunities for
economically disadvantaged students.
Our programs allow students to take
leadership in the classroom, while
re-engaging in the learning process."**

Abram Katz, ONTASC founder

"You don't want to write today?"

She shakes her head 'no,' but maintains eye contact.

"Do you know why?" I ask. She stares at me blankly, a whole universe behind those lids. "Let's try some sentence starters. Okay?"

She nods. I take her note pad and scrawl:

Katz: *I don't want to write because...*

Without looking up, she completes the sentence:

Kathryn: *Because this exercise is stupid.*

Now we're getting somewhere!

Katz: *This exercise is stupid because...*

Kathryn: *Because you're just pretending to care.*

ONTASC continued on next page

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Katz: *If I really cared, I'd know that...*

Kathryn: *You'd know that I'm sad about society.*

"Oh wow! I totally relate to that," I exclaim out loud.

She points back to the paper.

I redress, "Oh, sorry." Then write, *What makes you sad about society?*

After this question, Kathryn begins to write and doesn't stop writing for the duration of the class period.

When she showcases her digital story presentation to her classmates, Kathryn receives a standing ovation and a barrage of compliments. The wave of acceptance by her peers seems to levitate Kathryn right out of her chair. Once deemed 'socially anxious,' this young, talented artist stands and takes a bow.



Abram Katz is a passion-driven social artist, teacher, and teaching consultant. Katz creates safe and structured classroom environments where students are encouraged to get to know each other and find common ground. His strength lies in his ability to assess

the passions and challenges of diverse communities, and respond with dignity and inclusivity. As Co-Founder and Music Director of Indigital Kids (indigenous to digital music), a SF Bay Area educational non-profit, Katz brought expressive arts to underserved populations from 2005-2010. Katz is a focused, responsible, kind-hearted man with strong vision, and a unique ability to create art out of the human experience. Katz has been working closely with higher education institutions, offering teaching internships for pre-service teachers, and teaching consultation and development for K-12 teachers here in the Rogue Valley for the past 3+ years. The Heartisan Center, his latest endeavor, is a new youth center in Grants Pass scheduled to open in 2017. For more information about ONTASC, email Program Director, Abram R. Katz at abram@ontasc.com or visit www.ontasc.com.



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"Creativity" by Kathryn

As a child, I was full of creativity and imagination. I would make strange and creative stories; They seem chaotic and random to me now; Full of unorganized thought. Now I can't find that kind of raw creativity within me. Some may call it maturity or adulthood, but it's more like death. The fall of culture, where most movies seem to be about the same thing. It's the death of creativity. But when in a person's life does it die? Did we just use up all the creativity? Or does it get killed in public institutions? Systems based on conformity rather than individuality. Where adults shove facts into people's brains, labeling someone average, basing their success on others around them. Putting people on a scale of 1 to 10; The dunce cap everyone fears of wearing. If a genius was called stupid in high school because of a history class they may have failed, the world might be cheated out of an invention that could have saved lives, just because that one kid was afraid of being wrong. If only the world would appreciate imagination a bit more than intelligence; Maybe the problems of the world just need more creative solutions.

How often do we ask children to share their true feelings? How often is a safe environment created to hold these important stories? According to student testimonials from ONTASC's School-Community Programs, not often enough. For most young people, our classes provide the first opportunity in their lives to share something genuine about themselves with others.

We all have stories, but for many reasons they stay hidden. The goal of ONTASC's Digital Storytelling Program (also known as Truth Be Told) is to honor the unique spirit and expression of youth across all cultural and economic divides. Our immersive, strength-based curricula showcases the resiliency, beauty, and creativity of the human spirit. Our mission is to invigorate a socially and emotionally engaged society that truly cares for one another. We are re-framing school culture and the ways in which we share information with young people.

Meet Kathryn

A taciturn 6th grader with average test scores, a penchant for baggy sweatshirts, suffering from severe social anxiety. As illuminated in the previous article, Education, Innovation, and the Human Spirit, with compassion and guidance from her teacher, Kathryn was able to surmount her challenges through the writing process, and realize her hidden talent of voicing the concerns of her peers. With positive reinforcement of her innate gifts, Kathryn transformed from outlier to school president in just one afternoon.

Meet Rosa

A native Spanish-speaker with low test scores, a petite frame, and a heart of gold. Rosa is a "Level 2" Early English Learner. In this model, English literacy is measured on a scale of 1-5, where a 5 allows you to exit the bilingual immersion program. Rosa wrote her story in her native language, which has been translated into English for this publication.

For more information about ONTASC, email Program Director, Abram R. Katz at abram@ontasc.com or visit www.ontasc.com.



"Carolina's Landfill" by Rosa

There once was a girl named Carolina. She was so poor that she had no clothes. The few clothes she did have, came from the city dump. The city dump was what was holding her and her mom together. She wanted to study, but could not because during the day she spent all her time looking for things in the trash that she could sell to help her mother. She wanted to study music and learn to play guitar, but because she was so poor, she could not buy a guitar. During her search at the landfill, Carolina found a broken guitar. Carolina thought it was no good because it had a large hole in the back of the guitar. However, she decided to take it home. Her mother used to play guitar in the past because her father had taught her. The guitar had all its strings and she was able to tune it. It sounded good even though it had a hole.

One day her mother got sick and they had no money for her medicines. Carolina did not know what to do. She was very sad so she grabbed her guitar and sat on the sidewalk in front of where she lived. Someone came along and stood listening to her guitar playing. The person gave her money. Carolina knew how she would buy her mom's medicines. She would play her guitar to help her mom. Carolina would no longer have to go to the landfill. She would play her guitar to support her family. Over the years she became very well known in town and was busy all the time playing her guitar. Music had really given Carolina everything she needed.

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