

# Foreword

by Rick Wormeli

In the 2000 film *Billy Elliott*, starring Jamie Bell and Julie Walters, eleven-year-old Billy has had a rough time auditioning for the Royal Ballet Theater, and an even more difficult time getting his family to support his dream to be a dancer. After receiving skeptical views of his rebellious dance audition and a scolding for punching another boy auditioning for the same slot in the ballet company, Billy is sure he's failed and makes his way to the door. The judges stop him, however, and ask, "What does it feel like when you're dancing?" The camera closes in and Billy responds with raw honesty:

Don't know. Sorta feels good. Sorta stiff and that, but once I get going . . . then I like, forget everything. And . . . sorta disappear. Sorta disappear. Like I feel a change in my whole body. And I've got this fire in my body. I'm just there. Flyin' like a bird. Like electricity. Yeah, like electricity.

Billy's epiphany conveys the same emancipation as psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (2008) flow and so beautifully expressed in "High Flight," the classic poem by John Gillespie Magee Jr. (an American pilot serving in the Royal Canadian Air Force during World War II. Remember those lines from the poem: "Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth, and danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings," and later, "High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there . . ." To shed one's affectations and displace worldly angst while lost in the music and dancing is a cathartic moment of self-discovery; we come alive. In that electric moment, we experience robust belonging, daring hope, and real liberation. And to do this with a dance partner or team moving with you in synchronicity? We slip the surly bonds and become more than we were; we flourish.

Notice, though, that Billy's *soaring* dance and Magee's *hov'ring* are both grounded in the physics of their realities. Neither is supernatural, but what they achieve is in

direct response to their grounded realities turned powerful trebuchets. Billy dances with swinging arms and high-stepping cadence along the narrow rims of brick walls. He slams his body against encroaching walls to the beat of a primal rhythm only he can hear, practically leaping out of his skin, purging pent-up anger and catalyzing joy. He is released, just as Magee feels, emancipated from gravity, but deeply influenced by reality and fundamentals.

And so, we dance; music please . . . hear it? Now, we go: walk forward, back, forward, back, sidestep together, sidestep together—other direction now—sidestep together, sidestep together, rock step, rock step . . . and, one, two, cha-cha-cha! We're off!

In their book, *Teaching With the Instructional Cha-Chas: Four Steps to Make Learning Stick*, highly accomplished educators (our dance instructors) LeAnn Nickelsen and Melissa Dickson show us how to push one foot into new territory then bring the other foot to join the journey, all in a coordinated effort to maximize student learning. Notice how grounded they are in classroom reality and instructional truths at every turn, however. Who knew those elements could help us soar like this? One, two, cha-cha-cha—and cha! Twice the fiery, two-step *pasodoble*, this is a four-step dance done in a teacher's favorite style—*practical*. It's the *baile práctico de cuatro pasos: chunk, chew, check, and change!*

In our first foray to the dance floor as we read, several factors become apparent. First, LeAnn and Melissa know their neuroscience and the practical applications thereof. In fact, they are among the most studied educators I know, and even better, they are gifted communicators who make the latest in what we know about learning and the brain actionable—not in some fake, school-catalog-perfect classroom, but in classrooms that reflect our diverse realities and challenges. True to their professionalism, they reference recent and time-tested research, revisiting many of our education research

heroes, and providing multiple references for follow-up study. It's hard to be both scholarly and practical, vetting the research and activating teacher creativity, but wow—they do it well.

Second, LeAnn and Melissa are not just in favor of students owning their learning and acting on it, but also for teacher self-efficacy. A clear theme in these pages is that gradual release of responsibility for students, which Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey (2015) promote, and also for teachers to run with as well. *There's no sense in being beholden to the mere descriptions in this book simply because they are printed here.* They intone, *So use these tools and make them your own!* Thankfully, we're granted behind-the-scenes intimacy with lesson planning—serious, warts and all, truly reflecting a teacher's daily experiences—something other professional books mistakenly avoid. The authors are immediately inspiring, yes, but they provide teachers with specific tools to augment, revise, and differentiate each strategy to reflect their own style and students' challenges, cultivating instructional dexterity. With these tools we are responsive to current needs and versatile with those down the road. And particularly appropriate here: there's not one foo-foo-fluff activity in the group. All strategies included herein are substantive, resulting in real learning. Any National Board Certified teacher reflecting highly accomplished practice would be proud to use these ideas.

And good golly, let's hear it for each time they include a Bumping It Up, Breaking It Down, and, Specializing For section! Fortunately, they end every description of their strategies with this tag triad, demonstrating how to raise complexity and challenge, break the learning experience down, or extend the learning experience for those who might not find it accessible otherwise, so we can truly skip the differentiation platitudes and make it real for our classrooms. Their next book should be on just providing these three responses to fifty or more commonly used teaching techniques today. It would sell a lot of copies.

As someone who works with adult learners more and more, I'm excited about how many of these strategies can be adapted easily for professional development experiences. I'm grabbing ideas right and left as I read, upping my game as a teacher of teachers. Talk about engagement and making learning stick! I'm going to do the big picture, dynamic duo, and several chew strategies, for sure.

We're grateful, too, that LeAnn and Melissa put their considerable expertise in technology and assessment to wise use in these pages. They incorporate many technology integrations, and make an ample number of website and app recommendations, some of which I've used, and many of which I'm excited to try. They are ceaselessly attentive to the power of formative assessment and feedback in each of the cha-chas as well. Their approach reflects modern assessment thinking. While there is an emphasis on language arts and reading and writing examples, they applied the strategies to other subjects as well, and for that, I'm grateful too.

They don't mention it specifically, but there's a subtle theme of, *Let's activate joy and music in student learning and teacher lesson planning* that runs through many of their descriptions. My colleagues and I are so stoked by the creativity in these pages. In fact, we want to put down the book and go try the ideas right away, much like walking into a large hardware store and breathing it all in; we feel like we're going to pop unless we start building something right away! Just in reading their strategy sequence—*I do, we do, two do, you do*—I'm riffing on Frank Sinatra and wondering what else in teaching might have a rhythm I've missed all these years. In our stressful lives as educators, including local and national politics, racism, poverty, equity, demoralizing accountability measures, and increasingly limited resources, this stuff is not only refreshing, but it sustains us.

American country music singer Lee Ann Womack and songwriters Mark D. Sanders and Tia Sillers (2000) knew it all along. In their song, "I Hope You Dance," they invite us to never lose our sense of wonder, not to fear the mountains in the distance, or to settle for the path of least resistance. With LeAnn and Melissa's inspiration here, we can do these great things for and with our students. And, really, when given the chance to sit it out or dance, we hope you'll dance.

It's always stunning and a little humbling to discover the power of our students and their daily realities to breathe life into our classroom lessons. Let's stay vigilant in looking for it. Combine that newly tapped power of student realities with the instructional fundamentals from cognitive science, and students thrive. Well coached and cared for, we all dance; well grounded, we fly.

Then comes the music. Come, take my hand, turn the page, and let's dance. Instructional cha-chas indeed.