About the Author

Dr. Margaret Tannenbaum has been teaching for over twenty-five years at the pre-school, elementary, secondary, undergraduate, and graduate levels, including substituting in all subjects K to 12 for one semester. In addition to teaching in her major area of history, she has taught geography, reading, grammar and literature, philosophy, and computer science.

Walking, gardening, and the Macintosh computer are her main interests. She gives workshops for public school teachers and volunteers in the local schools to help students learn word processing and desktop publishing.

Marge currently teaches in the Secondary Education/Foundations of Education Department. She is married and has two children.
Every teacher has had the experience of the student who did poorly on the test saying, afterwards, “I didn’t understand the material.” When asked why she didn’t ask questions, the reply is usually, “I dunno.” For years I have been trying different ways to get students to take more responsibility for their own learning—on a daily basis.

This year I have required students to come to class with an index card on which they write at least one question about the assigned reading. I collect the cards at the beginning of each class period. The questions vary widely. Some students are looking for definitions of terms (I remind them of the existence of dictionaries); others want topics explained more fully or two topics explained in relationship to each other. Frequently the questions are requests for information beyond that offered in the text.

Initially, I tried several ways to incorporate their questions into the class periods: I would read the questions over to myself at the beginning of the period while the students were engaged in a short in-class writing exercise and attempt to incorporate the questions into the lecture and discussion period; I would summarize the questions on the board at the beginning of the
class period; or I would read individual questions directly from the cards as class went on. All of these methods resulted in only a few of the students' questions being answered. And, of course, there was another set of questions the next class period.

I was convinced that the question-writing activity was valuable in helping students focus their attention while they were reading, whether I got to answer their questions in class or not. However, I knew it would be even more valuable if I could answer every student's question every class period. The only way I could see to do this was to write my responses.

Knowing it would not be possible—in terms of time—to do this with every class, I selected the graduate course in The Foundations of Educational Policymaking, because the students are mostly teachers and administrators, and the class would prove a fertile laboratory in which to evaluate the results of the project.

I began by arranging the question cards so that similar questions were grouped together, sometimes making it possible to deal with a whole set of questions in a single (usually rather lengthy) response. I typed the questions into the computer, then typed my answers. As I wrote my answers, I rearranged some questions and answers because I discovered connections that at first were not apparent.

I printed the questions and answers and gave a copy of the dialogue to each student in the class.

This process was extremely time-consuming (5 to 6 hours a week), and I doubt if I would have been able to continue it without my laptop computer, which I carry nearly everywhere with me. This enabled me to work at odd moments and in unusual places, such as on the bus to and from Philadelphia for my son's class trip to the Franklin Institute.

This writing project has had some unexpected benefits. In addition to more actively involving the students in the lesson, the project has resulted in their writing longer and better questions, often including an introductory set of comments. Few students are now merely asking for facts they could find themselves. Many are asking my views on topics and asking me
to defend points of view I put forth in class. And that is the other major benefit of this exercise. I find myself, in this informal writing situation, thinking aloud on paper about things that hadn’t occurred to me before.

The majority of students seem to be very involved in the activity and appreciate the amount of work it takes to answer their questions. When one set of questions and responses reached five single-spaced typewritten pages and I suggested to them that the activity was getting out of hand, a number of students spoke up and encouraged me to continue.

Here are some sample student questions and my answers:

**QUESTION.** How do you feel about New Jersey’s establishing core course proficiencies in areas such as mathematics, science, etc.? How might these conflict with the individual needs of the school (community)?

**ANSWER.** I think I have come to believe that the only way we can hope to achieve anywhere near the goal of equal education for all is to establish proficiencies for all subjects in all geographic areas. There is no reason, it seems to me, why children from New York City should have to know more or less than those from Glassboro or Dayton. The question of how these proficiencies would be met would be a local prerogative.

**QUESTION.** I would like to know more about mediated entry. Is this just supervision during the first few years of teaching such as was student teaching? Is it training, evaluation and assistance from a master or experienced teacher for the intern teacher?

**ANSWER.** Basically, the concept of mediated entry is that a new teacher is not simply “thrown into” the classroom to be on his/her own. Although student teaching can be seen as a form of mediated entry, most
feel it is artificial and of too short duration really to count. The most extended form of mediated entry is probably that of doctors who put in at least two years as interns and residents before they are given full responsibility. As it applies to teaching, mediated entry is now being considered as part of a career ladder program in which new teachers would be considered interns and an internship would take the place of student teaching, but it would be for a longer time and the interns would be given some responsibility and paid (rather than paying to do the internship). Of course, then, master teachers—at the top of the career ladder—would be assigned responsibility for mentoring interns and be paid for it. The most desirable form of mediated entry is one in which the mentor provides continual assistance and feedback to the intern teacher, and a good deal of peer coaching goes on.

**QUESTION 1.** Obviously our educational system has adopted many philosophies, curricula, and principles from the ancient Greeks, through the Reformation to Dewey. In your opinion, who has had the greatest influence on our current educational practices?

**QUESTION 2.** Is there one pioneer in education you feel had the most influence on today’s schools? Are there any other individuals who were not mentioned in this chapter that you think should have been included as educational pioneers?

**ANSWER.** This is really a difficult question to respond to. The individual to whom more “homage” in American education is paid than any other is John Dewey. But in terms of actual impact on educational practices, I would guess that it is more lip service than reality. I would say that few individuals, if any, have had a significant influence on our current educational practice. Rather it has been more a matter of social and economic forces that have
determined the shape of education, such as industry, business, and the federal government. States passed legislation mandating attendance at public schools in the second half of the nineteenth century, along with child labor laws, because of the rise of the factory system and the prevalence of children working long hours in factories. At the beginning of the twentieth century, it was the American Manufacturers Association (business) that issued a major critique of American schools, citing their inefficiency, that coincided with the widespread growth of the testing movement. The Brown case in 1954, mandating desegregation, the Civil Rights Act in 1964, withholding federal money from school districts that refused to desegregate, and the passage of PL 94-142 have done more to affect the daily lives of teachers and students than the views of any individuals.