

# Preface

In a way we have been writing this book our whole lives. Lolly is a sixth-grade teacher. Russ is a university professor. We are parents of five children and grandparents of sixteen grandchildren. It is in living these roles that the principles in this book have emerged. Some would say that we have been “researching our own lived experience,” a method of making meaning by reflecting on one’s life (e.g., Van Manen, 1990). Others might say that we have been conducting studies in “appreciative inquiry,” an approach that helps improve whole organizations by focusing on their core strengths (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Still others might conclude that we have drawn from accepted theories in psychology or sociology such as self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997).

This volume might be viewed as a book to improve teaching and learning, a self-help book, or a guide to improve the performance of an entire school. We are not concerned about which view readers take; we simply want to achieve one central purpose: helping readers go beyond where they have gone before—doing better than they thought they could do—and in the process, helping others do the same. This is the central message of this book, and it applies to educators and those they educate—such as teachers, principals, and students—but it also applies to parents and families. We believe that this broad application is possible because the principles we describe in this book are fundamental to human improvement.

## THE MODEL

This book is organized around a model that we call Choose to Learn. This model consists of eight principles that lead to *success* (the first principle). The remaining principles are *urgency*, *risk*, *passion*, *help*, *motives*, *faith*, and *leadership*. By the time you finish the book, these one-word descriptors will help you remember each of the principles we include in the book and will serve as reminders of how you can use these principles to help students and other teachers.

Everything in the model is based on an individual's power to make personal choices—decisions that lead one closer to or further away from learning. That is why the illustration of the model at the beginning of each chapter is surrounded by the words “The Power of Personal Agency.” If someone were to ask us about the theoretical premise of the book, we would explain that every diagram, every table, every illustration rests on that one premise: the power of personal agency. Our purpose is to help every reader magnify that power and use it to benefit others.

## APPLYING THE MODEL

A model or an idea is valuable only to the degree that it is practiced. So many potential advances in education are ineffective not because the ideas are useless but because the ideas are not used. To help readers use the ideas in this book, we have included at the end of each chapter a section titled “Making It Happen.” This section contains suggestions for teachers to use the principles in each chapter to help students become more successful in their learning. Each suggestion is based on real experience with real students in real classrooms. Because we have used these suggestions in our own teaching, we are confident that when you use them, you will see marked improvement in student learning.

We do not see the lists of ideas in the Making It Happen sections as exhaustive. Instead, they are a way for teachers to begin experimenting with the principles that flow out of each part of the model.

## AUTHOR WEB SITE

We invite all readers to share with us your ideas for implementing the model. Some of these ideas will focus on how you used the model in the classroom. Others will emphasize personal applications of the model in your own life. To share an idea or learn about others' ideas, simply go to the following Web site: <http://choosetolearn.net/>. In addition to a readers' forum, the site will contain podcasts of the authors describing how to use the principles in the book to help students and others choose to learn.

## HELPING EVERYONE BECOME A LEARNER

There are few things in life more exciting than doing better than we've done before. Life, in one sense, is a series of learning experiences. The more we learn about ourselves and about the world around us, the better our life becomes—but only if we *succeed* in these learning experiences. If the challenges we face in the classroom or in the home or in our private space overwhelm us, we learn about defeat and may in the process become addicted to it. Then we become less able to face the next difficulty that comes. However, if we overcome the challenges, we learn about victory and become stronger and more certain that we can accomplish whatever goal we may set.

We agree with Benjamin Barber, a renowned sociologist, who said, "I don't divide the world into the weak and the strong, or the successes and the failures. . . . I divide the world into the *learners and nonlearners*" (see Dweck, 2006, p. 16; emphasis added). The person who chooses not to learn—and to avoid a task because it is too daunting—chooses not to live life to its fullest. The one who says, "This is good enough, I don't need to do any better," never feels the sensation of overcoming the seemingly impossible. This book is about helping oneself and others become learners by feeling those sensations every day.

*Note: When we share stories from our own experience, we will use first person. Accounts of younger learners are usually Lolly's, while those of adult students are Russ's.*