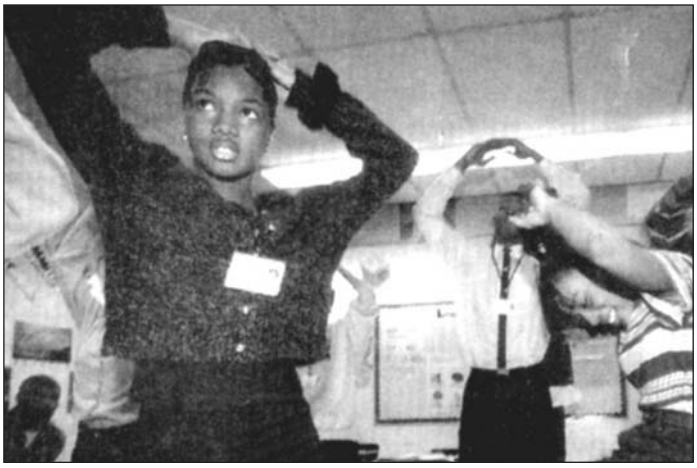
Chicago Tribune
Southwest

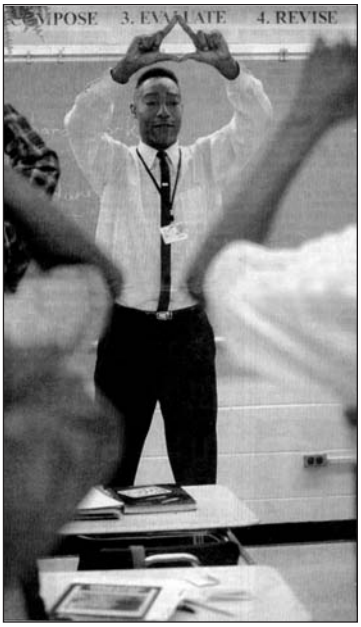
Educators turn to a new method that makes lessons more engaging.



Student Andrea Davis (left) and the rest of the students in Garner's class express themselves to music.

The subject is evil in a Hillcrest High School language arts class, but Chris Dixon, 16, finds something to smile about as he uses movement to define the word.

Teachers are taking a quantum leap



By Eileen Finan

SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

For Rhonda Cracco, learning to juggle scarves is no frivolous pastime. It's a step toward becoming a better math teacher.

"I'm willing to try anything that is not immoral or illegal," the Tinley Park High School teacher said about trying to reach more students. "You have to go out on a limb."

In Anthony Garner's language arts classroom in Hillcrest High School, students stroll in and take their seats to the sound of violins softly playing from a boom box. Garner uses classical music– on a recent morning, Dvorak, Bizet and Schubert symphonies–to create a calm and welcoming environment in which his students can learn.

Cracco and Garner, both teachers in south suburban Brement High School District 228, are using elements of an unusual teaching method, called quantum teaching, that has been gaining fans within the district, in other schools in the Chicago area and across the country.

District 228 officials said they are so encouraged by what they've seen over the last school year that they are increasing the number of teachers who will receive quantum training so that they can incorporate it in their classrooms this fall.

The quantum method is touted as the best of the old approaches mixed with new research on learning, all wrapped up in a user-friendly package that encourages the use of music, movement and catchy mnemonic devices to help students learn better.

Although some educators caution against embracing quantum as a panacea, others acknowledge that it is at least another teaching option that has shown some good results.

Garner, a 13-year teaching veteran, is in his second year of using the quantum method at Hillcrest High, in Country Club Hills. He said he has seen improvements in his students and himself.

"The little thinks don't bother me anymore," he said. "I'm a lot more flexible."

He recalled one quantum technique he tried at the beginning of the year.

"When I looked at the students, I visualized a gold star on each of their foreheads," he said. "I expected the best from all my students."

In return, he said, "they believed more in themselves and tried harder."

Cracco has been known to juggle scarves during math classes–such stunts help to break up a long class. But she said that even the more sedate quantum lessons engage her students.

Perhaps the greatest endorsement came from Chantiria Robinson, 16, one of Cracco's geometry students.

"I've had math at the same time in the morning for three years," she said. "This is the only class I've been able to stay awake in."

SEE QUANTUM, Reverse

Quantum

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Quantum teaching derives its name from the idea of "turning normal energy into something extraordinary," says Sarah Singer Nourie, a teacher from Thornton Township High School who has developed quantum training workshops for teachers.

Created by the California-based Learning Forum, the quantum approach is based on brain research that examines how the mind best learns and remembers. It emphasizes the use of color, music and physical movement as well as the creation of a safe, encouraging classroom environment and attention to different learning styles.

Much of the approach is recycled from methods already proven effective. What's new, advocates say, is that quantum puts them together in a practical form.

"I don't know that there is so much that is different in quantum teaching, but there are some creative strategies and applications," said JoAnne Evans, assistant superintendent for Thornton Township High School District 205.

Though initially used with advanced students, the program seems particularly effective with low-achievers, Evans said. She said that some such students have seen sharp increases in math and English test scores and that many of them now are enrolled in mainstream courses.

District 228 has seen gradual improvements in student grades since first offering quantum workshops to some teachers in 1995, said Jim Gallagher, the district's assistant superintendent for curriculum and development.

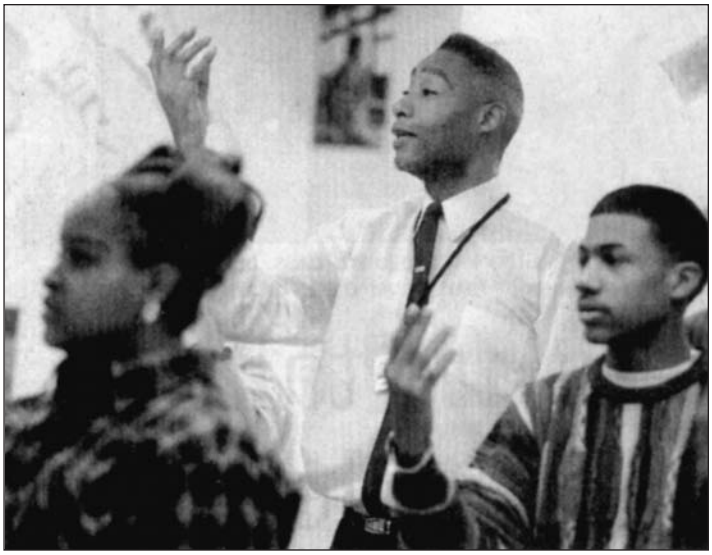
Gallagher said he believes the program is worth the price tag that comes with one year of training workshops.

"I cannot say that quantum teaching is the element that has raised (grades). I can say that quantum teaching has created a learning environment in some classes that addresses the needs of all kids," he said. "Student get to be responsible for their own learning."

But some educators complain that approaches such as quantum pander to today's infotainment tastes. Indeed, the scene at Singer Nourie's workshops, with foam toys, rubber balls and colored markers strewn about the floor, looks more like the set of a Nickelodeon children's show.

Singer Nourie insisted there is a serious method to the madness.

"It definitely has times of really high energy, but it is not like that all the time," she said.



Tribune photo by John Smith

In Country Club Hills' Hillcrest High School, language arts teacher Anthony Garner uses movement in his lessons. Garner, a 13-year teaching veteran, is in his second year of using the quantum method.

"You don't have to be an entertainer, but you do have to be interesting and engaging."

Garner said one of his more successful quantum lessons required nary a bell or whistle.

Above his classroom blackboard, Garner hung a poster with a single word, "evil." He asked his students to define the word and share their thoughts about the concept of evil. Only after this discussion did Garner present to them the novel they would read, "Lord of the Flies."

Because he gave them the experience of learning before the label of the lesson, "they related it more to themselves," Garner said.

Freelance writer Matthew Tennicott contributed to this report.