

The artful classroom: stories within a culture of learning

An educator describes how the artful classroom fosters learning and capacity for growth by actively engaging students in their learning.

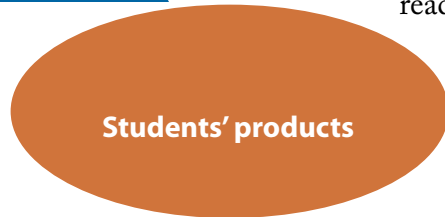
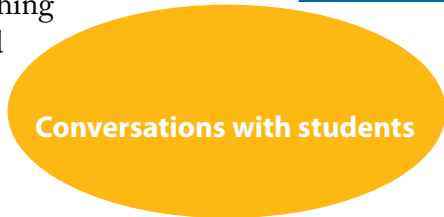
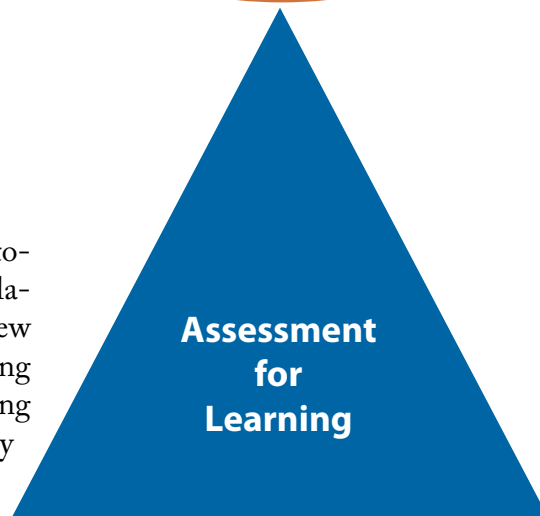
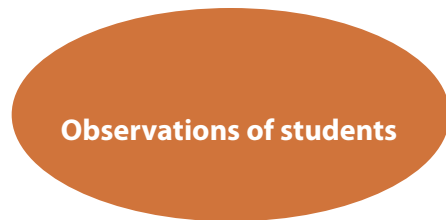
by Don Ottosen

The author thanks Anne Davis for her work on assessment. For information <http://annedavies.com/>

The brisk, heavy air of October is upon us. We are a relatively inexperienced crew aboard a grand vessel containing much precious cargo. Sailing along beautifully, we are oblivious to any menacing turbulence or obstacles, of anything that would impede our year-long journey.

In plain language, we are a typical grade six class that has been together for about a month. Our room is packed with friendly banter, laughter and vast potential. Unaware of anything that might come against us and our learning, we continue to learn the skills that help shape a desired future.

The year begins with a deceptively simple dialogue. What would we like to do and learn this year? We talk and write about our interests, what we already know and what



ideas on several charts and put them up so we can refer to them throughout the year. The activity is repeated, this time answering, what makes an excellent student? The side wall is covered with our ideas, printed large enough so that everyone can read them from their seat. We agree that if students and teachers follow these criteria, our class-

room will be an awesome place this year.

What do we think makes an excellent teacher? Excellent teachers:

- care about their students;
- give challenging, interesting work;
- are fair and consistent;
- help students with their work;
- explain clearly what students need to do to be successful;

things we wonder about. We introduce ourselves. We share. We listen.

Our teacher asks what we think makes an excellent teacher. In 10 groups of three, we record our thoughts on Post-it notes and a member from each small group takes a turn presenting their ideas. When all of the presenters are done the large chart paper at the front of the room is covered with bright, green slips of paper. Many groups have similar answers. Later, we record our

- describe in detail what needs to be done to improve work;
- don't lose their temper or yell at their students;
- are respectful of their student's feelings;
- listen to their students;
- compliment students when they deserve it;
- teach in different ways for a change sometimes;
- encourage their students;
- laugh with their students and sometimes tell riddles and funny stories;
- take their students on field trips;
- provide brain breaks and sponge activities;
- give enough homework but not too much; and
- make learning fun.

What do we think makes an excellent student? Excellent students:

- are respectful and care for each other;
- use *put-ups*, not *put-downs*;
- care about their learning and accept learning challenges;
- use self-control;
- try to do their best quality work (BQW);
- ask for help when needed;
- don't give up easily and know how to problem solve;
- use their W.I.T.S. (Walk away from the problem, Ignore the problem, Talk it out, and Seek adult assistance);
- are helpful and responsible;
- include others and work well in teams;
- listen well and don't interrupt another;
- don't complain and are patient;
- are creative thinkers;
- are calm and use appropriate

voices, and;

- compliment each other.

Safe moorage lies beyond a narrow neck of water; a harbour destination where a vessel can be replenished. Navigating through treacherous, mysterious seas, we align three markers ... Triangulation is a method of assessing our learning. It points to where learners are and where they are headed. Our conversations, observations and products are all evidence of learning.

Conversations that Illuminate

Teachers can learn much from listening to and talking with their students. Our conversations guide us, illuminating our paths.

Once a week we enjoy something called our 'class meeting.' During this time each participant has a chance to speak and be heard. On most Friday afternoons, desks are pushed aside and we arrange our chairs in a large circle with 'Sharkie,' our driftwood mascot in the center.

A small, wooden box containing four distinctive stones is passed around the circle: the compliment, problem, question and idea stones. One stone represents compliments and is shaped like the perfect 'skipper.' It's one that could be skipped across calm water, sometimes right onto the far bank of a little pond. Compliments are a lot like skippers, we are told. They create a ripple effect. When a person is handed the box, they hold the compliment stone and say something nice to someone in the circle. It has to be a sincere, meaningful comment, because this is about respecting others. Everyone leans in to listen and no one else talks while you have the box and are sharing. Each person compliments at least one person but no more than three. There is also a problem stone that you may use if you want

to describe a problem that occurred during the week to you or someone else that needs solving. Individuals can't be named when a problem is mentioned and a possible solution must be shared by the speaker who brought it up. If there is an idea that you'd like to share, such as a special activity that the class could do together, then the idea stone is used. Questions, if there are any, are posed using the final rock. One or two students record ideas that have been shared and also problems and questions, if they are important enough. The final part of the meeting is when the student(s) of the week are presented with their recognition, a *Power Performer* certificate, by the teacher. That night, their parents will receive a positive phone call.

Paying close attention to classroom conversations is vital and the ideas and stories we share help guide us, providing illumination and direction. Moreover, our discussions often point to our desired future, that which words and actions ultimately paint.

Cheerful landscapes line both sides of the hall outside our classroom, interspersed with geometric, perspective drawings and pastel resists. Our *Wow Wall* is plastered with a variety of student's best quality work. Creative, personal mobiles hang above each desk. Our classroom is a welcoming place and it's evident that students are proud of their efforts.

As we prepare to share with our parents on the annual parent interview day, students are asked to facilitate each meeting. An agenda is developed that covers many important areas of growth and learning. (*See an example agenda for a student-led conference on page 11*). Parents have been advised of the student-led conference format well in advance and

Student-led conference agenda

Name _____

If your teachers are available, introduce (or re-introduce) us to your parents when you enter the classroom. _____ (initial when completed)

Explain how our class created our excellent teacher/student criteria and share with your parents at least 3 ideas that resonate with you. _____ (initial when completed)

Read a selected page aloud to your parents. Choose the novel you are presently reading. Next, explain what you have been doing regarding your reading reflections each day. (You may want to share some of your reflections in your Duo-Tang). _____ (initial when completed)

Share with your parents, your favorite composition (story) that you have recently written. _____ (initial when completed)

Using a protractor, measure and correctly label the angles that have been provided for you on the back table. _____ (initial when completed)

Teach your parents some French and German. (Refer to your Duo-tang if you would like). _____ (initial when completed)

Share what you have been learning in Science. (Refer to your Duo-Tang). _____ (initial when completed)

Complete the self-assessment work habits sheet with your parents. _____ (initial when completed)

Share some of your art with your parents. _____ (initial when completed)

Explain a few of our important routines and activities we do each week in our class. (ie: class meetings, washroom routine, voice levels, smooth transitions, etc.). _____ (initial when completed)

Explain how reporting works this year in our class, using our performance scales for each subject area. Explain what is meant by the term, *Triangulation*. Also, with the assistance of your parents, write one or two personal 'learning related goals' that you wish to work on for next term. (Please write your goal(s) on the last page of the reporting document). _____ (initial when completed)

*If you haven't already had a chance to introduce your parent(s) to your teachers, meet with them now. Please bring this completed conference form and the work habits sheet with you.

We hope that you enjoyed sharing with your parents. Students participate in this type of exercise to showcase their work as well as to increase accountability for their own learning.

Mr. Ottosen and Mrs. Kuschel

they've been provided with a copy of the actual agenda their child will use. We know from experience that the successful completion of many classroom activities depends on parent support and good communication. This day will provide an opportunity for each student to reflect on their successes this term and to provide parents with examples of what they have learned in each of the academic areas. Students are also asked to explain what they are learning in the area of social responsibility and work habits. This is an extremely positive opportunity for students to showcase their strengths, acknowledge the areas that they need improvement in and, with parents in attendance, to set a few goals for students to reach by the end of the academic year. Due to the unique nature of these conferences, we are able to accommodate a few groups at a time and are therefore be more flexible with scheduling times. Each student-led conference will last approximately 30-minutes, which includes approximately 10-15 minutes to confer with the teachers.

We usually pursue a new art project each Monday. Most students complete their assignment by Friday but those who aren't quite finished by week's end are given more time. People process and learn differently and at different rates. Students are encouraged to persevere, re-think and to go deeper ... to explore. Some personal tasks and explorations are challenging and take a lot longer to complete but they can be even more rewarding when the destination is finally reached.

Students learn best when they understand where they are going with their learning. They need to know their learning destinations and why they are learning the things being presented. Students also need to

know where they are in relation to the goals that have been set. When they have a say in determining classroom learning goals and destinations, students discover where they need to go and what they must do to get there. The more students are involved in co-creating criteria and in their assessment process, the more they will learn.

The artful classroom fosters learning and capacity for growth by actively engaging students in their learning. As authors attempt to hook readers with an intriguing opener, teachers aim to draw their class in, to engage them. Students who are active in their learning are more likely to be successful in school. Creative, nurturing classes build bridges each day that are lined with life experiences. Such bridges connect us and improve learning as we work together and share our best thinking and stories.

Educators have learned to act on their inner sense of urgency and conscience in matters that they believe are important to their schools, and to navigate reflectively and with intent. Sharing our stories and ideas may not help solve all the problems and challenges within our schools. But as we continue to understand our interactions as a significant part

of our learning and culture, we may be prompted to ask ourselves change related and growth-oriented questions such as: How then, should we have acted? Where do we go from here? And, what have we learned from our work?

A painting metaphor can be used to explain how we consciously and unconsciously explore, create and process much of our learning in the artful classroom. We begin by defining or sketching an event, by being actively receptive to input or information. Once the canvas, or board is primed and our attention is focused, we begin to "flesh in," or paint the outlined sketch. We transform it from a simple contour drawing into a detailed memory image. A contour is a sensitive, modulated line that is the framework, or essence of the subject. Pressure is felt, and needed, as the weight of the sketching utensil meanders across the page creating interesting channels of thought and organization. This weighted demarcation, or creative pressure can be thought of as experience. Filling it in often appears messy and unpredictable; it is a problem-based exercise, but that is precisely what makes it so appealing and engaging. Learning this way is an exciting journey; a passage lined with many




Cover story

Our cover art this month is a mixed-media painting entitled, *Giraffes Can Dance* by Kate Cooledge, who is a grade 2 student at Pinecrest Elementary in Campbell River. Our thanks to Kate, her teacher, Heather Kennedy, Don Ottosen, vice-principal and Hendrick Horsthuis, principal.



Our personal stories often evoke powerful emotion and imagery. They propagate more than facts and data through the use of description, personal connection and experience. Our stories disseminate

hard-wired to create meaning and to share what they have discovered. Ultimately, it is a stirring up of experience, emotion and imagination that produce the greatest longing in many people. Knowing how to combine them is a challenge. Humans are a compilation of everyone we have grown to know; our personalities are far more dynamic and enigmatic than any shifting ambiguity or powerful tension found in a masterpiece by Cézanne. Together, in our artful classroom we continue our grand journey. 

opportunities.

Paul Cézanne, the Father of Modern Art, was fascinated and challenged with his self imposed task of creating an ambiguous push/pull of action (or perception) on his canvas, a sort of juxtaposition of the positive and negative space within the image. He hoped that by pursuing this course of action, a person who studied the work of art would see and experience an almost physical tension or dynamic “twisting” sensation in their brain when viewing it. Have you ever entered a dimly lit room with clothes strewn haphazardly on a chair or table? Your first thought may be that there is a person or cat crouching there ready to pounce, but suddenly there is a shift or twist; you can physically feel your perception alter. There is the realization that they are simply clothes heaped in a mess. The challenge, as Cézanne envisioned and struggled towards, is to “flip-flop” your perception from clothes to creature and back again.

The use of metaphor in stories is common and adds a layer of complexity and greater understanding. This is not surprising, for the Greek origin of the word metaphor comes from the verb to transform. Our stories have the power to transform.

nate knowledge; they conjugate. The paradox, if there is one here, is that as stories are flung far and wide, told and retold, debated and agreed upon, the emotional response they evoke unites participants. Like Cézanne’s creative tension our stories can touch something unseen, yet recognizable in each one of us, often revealing important new truths about our lives, our world and ourselves.

When students are taught how to make meaningful connections with others and bravely cross those difficult bridges in their lives, they learn to imaginatively combine a complex field of ideas into something new and meaningful; they thrive. We are all storytellers and artists; value is added to our stories, our images, and to our lives as we interact with others. Such a human endeavor and creative investigation is vital, for people are

Don Ottosen, pictured above, with his class, is vice-principal at Pinecrest Elementary in Campbell River. This is his first article for Adminfo. Don enjoys writing about his classroom teaching experiences and would like to continue sharing what they are doing throughout the year. He can be reached at don.ottosen@sd72.bc.ca

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