Making Learning Visible - Project Zero

Learning from the Students of Reggio Emilia

Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

How do we document teaching and learning in our classrooms and schools? How do we know they know? How do teachers arrive at authentic, inquiry questions and how can we support that process? This is just a sampling of the questions I brought with me as I made my way to the Making Learning Visible (MLV) Institute at Project Zero in July.

As a member of the Lucent Collaborative Learning Community Project Team, I have been actively exploring the notions of inquiry and documentation, and the ways both interact to inform teacher practice in schools. At the MLV Institute, I took a step back from my starting point of teaching implications to look long and hard at the role of documentation for students’ understanding of their own learning. This new point of entry, while it now seems obvious to me, added layers to my thinking and questioning. We know that sustained, focused conversations with one another are among the most essential elements of the work we do. So, I joined my colleagues from Project Zero and Reggio Emilia to do the work we most need to do, with the people whose wisdom, perspective, and skill we most need. We connect with our colleagues from our CFG Coaches Institute, from your Facilitative Learning Community, the commitments we hold are the same:

- to be reflective
- to make our practice public to one another
- to frame meaningful questions and ask for substantive feedback from our colleagues
- to hold each other accountable for meeting the needs of students who struggle most
- to ask the kinds of questions that probe and challenge both our assumptions and our habits
- to believe that together we are even more capable of knowing what we need to know and learning what we need to do than we are alone

When I arrived in Reggio Emilia, I brought my chairs around a table and began work that changed my professional lives. In December 1995, the National School Reform Faculty convened its first Winter Meeting in Chicago, and what began as a small gathering for those early cohorts of newly trained CFG Coaches has become an annual source of renewal for hundreds, providing time to think and inquire, and space for courageous work to take root.

We know that sustained, focused conversations with one another are among the most essential elements of the work we do. So, I joined my colleagues in Cambridge, Massachusetts to do the work you most need to do, with the people whose wisdom, perspective, and skill you most need. We connect with our colleagues from your CFG Coaches Institute, from your Facilitative Learning Community, the commitments we hold are the same:

- to be reflective
- to make our practice public to one another
- to frame meaningful questions and ask for substantive feedback from our colleagues
- to hold each other accountable for meeting the needs of students who struggle most
- to ask the kinds of questions that probe and challenge both our assumptions and our habits
- to believe that together we are even more capable of knowing what we need to know and learning what we need to do than we are alone

When taken together, the students’ thoughts and their collaborative drawings offered a rich window into their thinking. This window was an invaluable resource for the students as they reflected on their own thoughts, collaborated with peers and refined their thinking as a result of their heightened awareness of both their process and their abilities, individually and as a group.

I was struck by many aspects of the students’ learning, not the least of which was the way they engaged each other’s thinking. This process was way beyond the cooperative learning models that I had seen and used. This wasn’t cooperative work to make large classes manageable, this was authentic, true collaboration. The students weren’t following someone else’s script. Instead, these kids were building on each other’s thinking, asking and answering their own questions. At one point, the students decided to make sure their city “worked.” They decided, among themselves, that an important test for determining whether a city worked or not was your ability to travel from one place to any other place through the streets. Once they agreed to this criterion, they designed a test and used their fingers to trace the streets from one side of their city to the other. When their test worked, all three times, they expressed satisfaction with their model.

Project Zero has learned many lessons from its collaboration with the Reggio schools. Here are the four fun...
The Cambridge Rindge and Latin School
Beth Graham, Massachusetts

Fall 2004
4 Connections: a Journal of the National School Reform Faculty

School Three - The Cambridge Rindge and Latin School
Beth Graham, Massachusetts

F

four years ago, when I became principal of a small school in a small town in high school, I had the rare opportunity to grow a new community. I resolved to create a school that sharply contrasted from the non-institutional institutions of which I had been a product. In order to begin this task, I was curious and promoted myself as head learner. For teachers, students, and parents, I modeled “not knowing.” I was curious, asked a lot of questions, and resisted easy solutions. As a result, I helped us begin to manage the ambiguity that comes from doing school differently. We began to understand, for example, that teaching and learning are complex issues, and must remain at a complex level if we are to do deep, meaningful work in schools. Because I made my own learning public, teachers started to buy in, and a few began to share in the decisions that affected our school.

First, we had to create new structures to support our new learning. A schedule was created, therefore, that provided common planning time for teachers. Having time available was not enough, however: teachers required my support as facilitator of those meetings in order to transfer their experience into new contexts of privatized teacher practice. What would it take to shift the culture of adults in order to best meet the needs of all students? We had to learn to work differently.

First, we had to create new structures to support our new learning. A schedule was created, therefore, that provided common planning time for teachers. Having time available was not enough, however: teachers required my support as facilitator of those meetings in order to transfer their experience into new contexts of privatized teacher practice. What would it take to shift the culture of adults in order to best meet the needs of all students? We had to learn to work differently.

When structures such as common planning time were critical to support our new learning, how we used the structures was pivotal in our becoming a professional learning community. For example, in addition to our core curriculum meetings, a weekly meeting was convened for all advisors. While developing close, personal relationships with some students and families in these meetings, we used the Consultancy Protocol to ask for and receive the kind of feedback we needed from each other in order to improve our practice. As a full participant in these meetings, I often presented the dilemmas I faced working with my own group of twelve individuals. I brought authentic work to the table, modeled vulnerability for my staff (thereby making it safe for them to go public with their works), and received invaluable support from colleagues.

Using protocols to do our work and engaging in reflective practice became hallmarks of our emerging community. Staff meetings opened with Connections, a time of transition from our work with children to our work with adults that allowed us to hit the brakes and gain perspective on our work. Because I kept “administrivia” out of the way of what I considered to be the “real” work of teaching and learning (morning memos and email were the vehicles for communicating the urgent, but not important issues in our school), we also had time in meetings to write together. Most of us kept journals, and we learned that we needed that space and time to reflect together as a community of adult learners, and as individuals. Using the Collaborative Assessment Conference, we examined student work from multiple perspectives, and surfaced our (often contradictory) assumptions about teaching and learning. Finally, The Tuning Protocol allowed us to ask for help in improving our assignments, and to design authentic assessments that provoked students to demonstrate deep understanding.

These structured conversations were so much more than nimble exercises and clever activities – this became the way we worked in our school. It was our culture.

As a result, the adults in our school became collaborators, and, ultimately, modeled thinking and learning for our kids. It was not unusual to observe teachers being transparent in their practice in front of kids: “Where do you think we should go next?” “What do you think we need to do to support your learning?” “As teachers became more comfortable in their new roles as coaches, or facilitators of learning, most were able to slip the bonds of having to be the expert in the room.

(continued on page 19)