

Innovative Networks

Well-being For All - Deep And Creative Thinking

Suzie, are you ever surprised at the depth of the thinking of some of your students on the Knowledge Forum?

Actually, yes. Many times, and many occasions you can see the depth of thinking on Knowledge Forum, which is a reason why I love the tool. However, you know, sometimes as a teacher, when you're in the classroom and you're wondering what everybody's thinking, it can get a little bit uncomfortable, especially if you haven't heard from a student, and you've communicated and you feel as though the group has communicated very clearly what's happening. So as a teacher, I've started to wonder what's happening with one of my students. And if I pop onto Knowledge Forum, it just blows me away with what I see and hear from my students, that actually proves they're thinking, and then some. There's an idea there. They're able to rephrase and take a learning and apply it to a new context. So there's so much happening behind what we perceive as what's happening in live time. So I think that for my own self, in assessing students, it's very important to afford them the opportunity, so I can pop in to hear that student voice in another manner.

We've actually done a fair amount of research. The one is asking philosophers of science, so really experts in their field, to evaluate the level of thought. So we just take all of the discourse out of the database and ask them to evaluate on a scale of one to five how sophisticated this thought is. At the low level is the student's grade level, at the high level is somebody within your expert community would be thinking this way. And they're always substantially above grade level. And some of markings of how we think in our philosophy of science context.

The other research we did is, we do an evaluation. So we look at the first third of the database and the last third of the database, and we try to evaluate how much change has taken place for every single person within the discourse that exists in the database. So we find significant change.

But the one thing that's interesting is that their assessments are not good predictors of how well they would be thinking. So the students who one would think would be weak are not seen as weak in the data that we've looked at. So just from a research point of view, really supports what you've said. Once they have a voice, once other people build on their ideas, once they see action happening, they become stronger in their voice and contributions and well-being.

It empowers their well-being.

Yeah. I think as this child said, "They're working with my idea. Look what I started." It's powerful.

You know, I'd just add one thing, and that is, Suzie, you say how excited you get when they come up with these great ideas. The part that doesn't show is, I'm pretty sure you have the

effect on them. Your enthusiasm goes back to them. So it's a kind of a virtuous circle, right, of ideas and response to ideas, producing more ideas. And that's why even when the teacher's really not in there evaluating or criticizing or leading, but simply reacting as a human being.

I mean, this business of -- I never imagined students could produce such interesting stuff. We hear this often. By experienced teachers who have been doing a great job for decades, sometimes, and yet their eyes just pop open when they see what kids can do. And then the kids do more of it.

Yeah, there's so many layers of how we arrive here as a community. And it's hard to imagine, but as I plan for my next year and my next set of students, you know, if I could pinpoint on certain things, it's really difficult. But I can certainly connect to what you're saying, and that is a part of my natural course I do. It's content-driven, and I really do show excitement about their progression of idea, growth and diversity.

You remind me of a teacher who similarly taught for 30 years, and kept reporting, I've not seen my students' ideas before. Like, they're just displaying out there what they're thinking about anthropology, which is his content area. And he was so excited about their ideas. He would go off, and he did a lot of one-to-one conferencing with the students, and I remember going into the classroom one day, and this kid says, "Now he thinks I can read Hawkings. I mean, I can't even understand the book!" But then he said, "Oh, actually, the other kids will help me understand it. So I guess I will, I'll try Hawkings." There's just this sense of the power of their ideas. I guess if there's one thing I really believe, is this notion that teachers just feel the power of kids' ideas. I think that's the most important dynamic.

Suzie, would you say that your role in setting these conditions at the beginning of the year so that your students feel safe taking risks and making mistakes is critical to building this kind of community?

Yes, it's very critical, you know? And you say the beginning of the year -- it starts at the beginning, but however, it continues on until the day they leave, you know? We're constantly revisiting all types of aspects of learning together, you know -- social aspects, emotional, cognitive -- as these items arise, that's when they're addressed. You know, looking at somebody in the eye, or slouching over when somebody else is talking, what does that say to that person? Just so many different areas that we think about as learners together, in order to continue our journey together, is really important.

And imagine if you didn't have to start over with a new group who'd never done knowledge-building before.

Oh.

You know, so that that culture grew over the years, as opposed to your needing to start it from scratch.

That's one of my wishes, right, so to have a community that would go on, and the previous grade would just come over to me and just continue that, would be truly beautiful. And I think that's one of our goals, is to have that happen, especially within our school setting, and continue that seamless transition into grades and learning environments.

Yeah. When we get the longitudinal data, it just gets stronger and stronger and stronger. But it really takes consecutive years.