

Trust, Listening and the Role of the Principal: Building a Community of Learners with Principals, Teachers, Students and Parents at St. Sebastian School, Toronto.

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Abstract

This paper will look at how one inner city school in Toronto nurtured a community of learners with staff, students and parents using online pedagogical documentation for learning. Students were encouraged to publish and document their work online rather than hand it in. The process built further engagement for learning as it acted as a catalyst for building inquiry through brain based learning and culturally responsive teaching. As their learning journey progressed, students began tackling more challenging complex learning, including the study of math through the lens of social justice.

Keywords: Pedagogical documentation, social media, 21st century, mathematics

Trust, Listening and the Role of the Principal: Building a Community of Learners with Principals, Teachers, Students and Parents at St. Sebastian School, Toronto.

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Through twitter, blogs, voice and video documentation, student learning at St. Sebastian School in Toronto, is showcased, celebrated and informs teaching. By posting student learning at all stages, we invite our community to celebrate student thinking and not just the final product. We trust our colleagues, parents and students to celebrate student learning and to value the use of using student work to inform our teaching and learning (pedagogical documentation). In *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students*, Zaretta Hammond recognizes a clear relationship between brain-based learning and culturally responsive teaching. “Cognitive higher order thinking has always been at the center of Culturally Responsive Teaching” (p.4). Recognizing this connection, all of our inquiries are discussed and assessed through the explicit language of the growth mindset. Through the use of online pedagogical documentation of student learning our students and staff have built inquiry, informed teaching and learning, fostered a learning community built on trust and encouraged parent and student engagement for learning. This is our story...

The importance of building trust, engagement and collaboration through the examination of student learning is supported by many researchers including Hargreaves, Fullan, and Hattie as well as the research published in the Ontario Capacity Building Series. In *Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in Every School* (2012) Hargreaves and Fullan write that “Professional Capital is about **collective responsibility** ... {and is} ... measured in terms of the frequency and focus of conversations and interactions with peers that centered on instruction and was based on **feelings of trust and closeness between teachers**” (p.3) In the article, *For America’s Public School Success: Human and Social Capital* by Cheryl Williams (2012), social capital is exhibited by high levels of **trust, collaboration, collective responsibility, mutual assistance, professional networks** and an **identity** that’s tied to the bigger picture and vision for the work being done (Williams, 2012). Hattie says that the best talk is listening. Through pictures, blogs, video and audio documentation, we as a community of learners are listening to student thinking at every stage. This process of using online pedagogical documentation to inform this dialogue involves high levels of trust as teachers open their classrooms to other teachers, the Principal, students and parents.

The success of our project to document student work at all stages, involves high levels of trust between teachers, students, staff and the greater community. Teachers need to feel that efforts to build a community focussed on learning are being supported. Posting work at the unfinished stage, allows the community to look and listen to student thinking, effectively opening classrooms to the community, to other teachers, to parents and to the world. Inviting other educators, parents and students to comment on student learning is initially frightening but can have significant benefits towards building a community of learners and improving teaching and learning in the classroom.

How does the role of listening and trust inform student learning and build student and parent engagement at St. Sebastian School?

This article will explain the role of pedagogical documentation (evidence of student learning, including pictures, student writing, student blogs, video and voice documentation) to inform teaching and learning. It will also explain how we used the process of pedagogical documentation with the framework of metacognition to extend learning opportunities for students. Using the growth mindset research of Carol Dweck and Jo Boaler (the premise that the role of perseverance, grit and effort can be explicitly taught to students) students were encouraged to monitor their own process of learning and encouraged to use self and peer descriptive feedback to improve learning. Finally the community of St. Sebastian used online documentation to engage parents in student learning by highlighting the impact of student and parent voice.

Using online pedagogical documentation, the community of St. Sebastian has embarked on a learning journey to a) inform student learning (listening to student thinking): b) extend and celebrate student voice, and c) support/ encourage parent engagement in student learning. Through the use of pedagogical documentation, teachers, parents and students have made student interests, thinking and understanding the driver of instruction. Through pedagogical documentation, Ontario educators are finding creative and lasting ways to.

1. Create shared understanding
2. Celebrate the rights of individual learners
3. Recognize student ownership of knowledge
4. Actualize shared responsibility
5. Provide voice in learning for everyone (CBS, 2012).

Through blogs, twitter, voice and video documentation, student learning at St. Sebastian is showcased, celebrated, and informs curriculum in ways that "...are genuinely responsive to learning needs" (CBS, 2012). Examples of our learning in this area can be found at the following site: storify.com/giannahelling/talk-to-learn

Documenting and posting student work and evidence of student learning puts learning at the center of the discussion. It informs student learning, builds student engagement for learning and builds parent engagement for student learning. Celebrating student learning is essential to building trust and opening classrooms to teachers, students and parents. Publishing student work is meaningful to students because they shared it with the community. Students are able to use the documentation to analyze and refine their learning and are positively engaged in the learning process. In addition to building and responding to parent and student voice, it also showcases the innovative teaching and learning practices occurring at St. Sebastian. The following site provides examples of how we use technology to inform learning and empower student and parent voice. storify.com/giannahelling/using-technology-to-empower-student-and-parentvoice

In *Inspire, Motivate, Collaborate* (2009) Moore writes about creating a culture of commitment to each other. He states that the more you as principal “focus and acknowledge the positive behaviors in your school, the more you will increase the positive attitudes and the higher level of commitment you will have” (p.41). This vision guides the role of the Principal. Based on this vision of leadership, celebration and shared commitment, our school community documents, discusses, refines, and celebrates student learning, specifically involving parents in the process.

The process of pedagogical documentation honours the role of student voice. Creating shared understanding of student learning and refining teacher practice based on student work “...drives future curriculum in ways that are genuinely responsive to learning needs, making student learning ...a deeply personalized and engaging experience” (CBS, 2012). It also acknowledges and is responsive to the voice of the community. Opening up our classrooms and learning to other teachers in the community and to the parents, involves a high level of trust. In *The Fourth Way: The Inspiring Future for Educational Change* (2008), Hargreaves and Shirley write that “trust cooperation, and responsibility create collegiality and shared, committed, professional learning that improves classroom effectiveness” (p. 142). When “... professionals work side by side with parents and communities to serve the children” (p. 79) this partnership builds a relationship of trust between the school and the home. Celebrating student learning is essential to building trust and opening classrooms to teachers, students and parents. Hearing and acting on student voice, allowing student and parent voice to be impactful- that is the magic of trust.

Explicitly Teaching Resilience, Grit and the Growth Mindset: Culturally Responsive Teaching and Brain Based Learning

Explicitly teaching the role of the growth mindset to staff and students is supported by the Ontario Ministry of Education Capacity Building Series on Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (November, 2013). Purposefully teaching students and parents how to reframe the dialogue, learn from mistakes and persevere in the face of adversity, is central to students feelings of belonging, engagement and to strengthening the voice of students in the school community. Based on the research of Jo Boalar and Carol Dweck, students, teachers and the greater community of St. Sebastian are learning about strategies to build perseverance, learn from their mistakes and to focus on the process of learning rather than the final product. Brain based learning and “...higher order thinking has always been at the centre of Culturally Responsive Teaching (Hammond, p. 4). Lessons that are culturally relevant, resonate with a sense of purpose and demonstrate the interests of our community. They therefore, bear witness to the lives of our community. Please see our learning on Culturally Responsive Pedagogy at: storify.com/giannahelling/culturally-responsive-pedagogy

In order to value parent and student voice, students and parents must feel that their voice is impactful. Student and parent voice must inform the classroom practice, school culture and pedagogy.

Recognizing this need, parents, students and staff at St Sebastian School embarked on an inquiry in Social Justice and Math. This inquiry recognizes that learning is inherently a social process. It also responds to our deep emotional concern for others. Beginning with the Math Charity

Challenge, students began an inquiry into wealth disparity, charity and real life problem solving in the Mathematics curriculum. Their story is documented in a series of blogs, tweets and is Storified- [storify.com/giannahelling/math-charity-challenge](https://www.storify.com/giannahelling/math-charity-challenge). The documenting of the inquiry informed classroom practice, student discussion and inquiry, built awareness in the community for our Brick by Brick charity, celebrated student learning, and supported peer and parent descriptive feedback based on the growth mindset. Our first “Math Charity Challenge” -was so impactful, it led to an international inquiry on Math and Wealth disparity. An online classroom platform was set up so that teachers, parents and students could share ideas, information and use peer and teacher feedback to inform assignments. Through this collaboration, we have effectively opened up the classrooms and the school community to the online international community. Encouraging students, parents and staff to learn from each other, other schools in Ontario and the world, effectively moving learning from “us” to “we” and honouring our place in the world community. This is our story... [storify.com/giannahelling/social-justice-and-math](https://www.storify.com/giannahelling/social-justice-and-math)

Through the use of online pedagogical documentation of student learning, the community of St. Sebastian School has built a learning community that actively listens to student thinking to inform teaching and learning. This focus on student learning has encouraged inquiry. Using culturally responsive pedagogy and brain based learning, students have asked important questions about the world community, have sought answers to complex issues and have examined mathematics through the lens of social justice. Documenting and posting the inquiries through online journals, blogs and Twitter has been important to engaging parents, students and staff in the learning process.

Please note that the links to the Storify sites represent student work samples in the areas being described.

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