

Pedagogical Documentation: Opening Windows onto Learning

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Tips for Going Public with Student Learning

- Keep focused on your true intention which is to open a window onto the work and thought processes of students.
- Start with small steps focused on individual learning stories which show a milestone in development or a breakthrough in understanding.
- Whether visual display or classroom blog, use a simple format.
- Use “family-friendly” language.

The crucial step of “going public” with documentation can be a challenging one. What can educators do to communicate *what they are learning about student learning* with parents, other staff and the wider school community?

Inspired by their observations of learners in K–12 classrooms, educators are transforming their practice. They are finding innovative ways to learn *with* their students in collaborative, social contexts, and to go beyond traditional evidence-gathering, such as paper and pencil tasks, to better understand how students learn through play, inquiry projects, conversations, and social interactions. Many are employing diverse forms of *pedagogical documentation* as a powerful way of chronicling student learning in action, attributing value to the thoughts and feelings of the learners themselves during the process. Yet many also are uncertain how to communicate this learning. They are asking, “How will [I] collaborate with students, families and colleagues in the communication of the learning in the documentation?”¹ (p. 8).

The Power of Documenting

Documentation involves “observing, recording, interpreting, and sharing, through a variety of media, the processes and products of teaching and learning in order to deepen learning”² (p. 38). Research across grade levels provides evidence of the powerful effects of documentation on multiple aspects of learning, including the emotional, the cognitive, and the social.³

Since teacher and student learning are deeply interwoven, both teachers and learners benefit from the documentation process. While documenting, teachers become researchers. As teachers delve into their “story of the movement of children’s understanding” (p. 3),⁴ they are also learning about themselves. Carlina Rinaldi defines this type of research as “an attitude and an approach in everyday living, in schools and in life... as a way of thinking for ourselves and thinking with others, a way of relating with others, with the world around us and with life”⁵ (p. 2).

Documentation “supports students’ learning from early childhood to secondary school” (p. 38).⁶ Through documentation, and the conversations it inspires, learners are empowered to articulate their thinking, feelings, and beliefs about themselves and their learning. Listening to learners, teachers learn to attribute value to aspects of learning experiences from the learner’s perspective. For example, a teacher observes two girls rolling a die and arranging the corresponding number of shells. One girl, Lila, notes, “I’m playing with Angelina.”⁷ For kindergarten-aged Lila, the value of playing with a friend is primary, and the mathematical learning is secondary. By observing and listening, the teacher is able to understand and to document both dimensions of Lila’s learning experience.

We know pedagogical documentation in the classroom is powerful. How can taking the step of publicly displaying documentation benefit learners as well as the school community, including other teachers and families?

The Art of Going Public

Given et al.² found that a collaborative inquiry group “experienced its most powerful shift when it decided to share documentation and collective learning in public arenas” (p. 40). The crucial step of “going public” with their documentation can be a challenging one for teachers.⁴ With this in mind, two Kindergarten teachers describe here how they communicate learning stories with learners and the school community. The processes they describe can be applied at any grade level.

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One teacher has been utilizing visual displays in her classroom and school, and the second has been posting a classroom blog shared with families and other members of the school community. What follows are their accounts of what works for them.

Carole Anne’s Visual Display

In my classroom, I use *visual display* to document student learning. By visual display, I mean some form of illustration accompanied by text. The illustrations may be photographs captured by the teacher, or the drawings and paintings of the learners themselves. The accompanying text is usually a description, a narrative, or a verbatim transcript of a classroom conversation. The whole process involves careful observation and thoughtful listening. I am guided by the inspiring image of the window used by Judy Harris Helm and her colleagues.⁸ Although the visual displays have the effect of beautifying the environment, their true intention is to open a window onto the work and thought processes of the learners. I am guided by the following practices:

- Use the classroom environment strategically and with intention.
- Keep classroom display surfaces intentionally spare to create a canvas effect.
- Capture images with photographs and learners’ thought processes with video, stills, or pencil and paper.
- Arrange displays resulting from these interactions in a variety of ways throughout the classroom and hallway to create windows into the dynamic, ever-changing workings of your classroom.

- Have learners' paintings and observational drawings on constant display. Accompany them with photographs and narrative text to bring the art process to life. *How did you create the movement of the wind in the park?*
- Display three-dimensional structures and art pieces on window ledges, intermingled with photographs and text. *What did you do to make your cat sculpture seem to walk?*
- Create a learning story that documents a milestone in the development of one particular learner. Ask: *What breakthrough was observed? What specific actions did the learner take?*
- Use hallway corkboards to display the process of an inquiry project.
- Create individual "window" panels, using text and photographs of a project, to provide a running record of an inquiry, detailing the work and thinking of learners. These public displays spark lively discussion within the school community; they are visited by older students, who share their respect and amazement at the learning capacity of young learners.

I began my journey into documentation with baby steps, focusing on individual learning stories. Like any journeyman, I hone my skills as each day passes, encouraged by the energizing effect it has had on my practice. I come to know my students on a much deeper level, making differentiated instruction easier to achieve. I watch in awe as young children grow into strong, capable learners accustomed to sharing their thinking in open dialogue with peers and teachers. It's a journey I plan to continue.

Amanda's Blog*

My classroom blog has a simple format, drawing attention to photos of work in progress, quotes from learners, work samples, and links to curriculum expectations,⁹ as well as quotes from early learning research. The learning documented is explained in family-friendly language. The blog acts as a connection between school and home and

to extended families as well (I have had grandparents in Germany comment on how much they enjoy this window into their grandchild's learning). It is an engaging way of communicating learning, and acts as a springboard for conversations among learners and family members. This, in turn, encourages oral communication, metacognition, and sharing of learning goals while strengthening the family-school relationship.

A parent reports that the blog offers a "wonderful way to get a discussion going with Ada [pseudonym] about what is happening at school. We look at it together and she talks about the activities in the photos, but she also tells us about other things that were happening ... I really think it is so worthwhile for us as parents to feel that connection to our child's daily life at school and see the learning!" When I update the blog (about twice a week), I send parents an e-mail (with the link included) to notify them. I find these reminders keep the families checking in more often.

The processes these teachers describe can be applied at any grade level.

Knowing what to publish and how to share this documented learning is a never-ending journey. As a class, we review blog entries on the classroom television, and children are encouraged to comment and give feedback. I've discovered that knowing your students and taking the time to slow down and really listen to them is important. Careful listening is essential because what

I might assume they are learning, thinking, or feeling could be completely different from what they have to say! Recording their words on either paper or iPad is vital. From there, experiment until you find what works for you and for your learners. I have found that the following practices work well for me:

- Take lots of photographs.
- Create a digital photo album for each child and sort photos of their work into their albums at the end of each day.

- Have the children take photos of work they want to save, share or extend and tag their work so it can be identified. Print the work for them so they can write about the learning or their next steps and add it to their portfolio.
- Create and publish learning stories using applications such as Pic Collage, to send home, post on the blog or in our learning environment (visual displays, classroom books, etc., to revisit and discuss, to send home for parent feedback).
- Send e-mails notifying the parents about new blog posts.
- E-mail photos of children to their parents throughout the day with small captions with their child's quote attached. Both children and the parents LOVE this!
- Use applications such as Explain Everything so learners can describe their learning visually and orally. Use this during parent interviews or as assessment for and of learning.

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My practice continues to evolve and grow through reflection and discussions with colleagues. I frequently visit other teachers to exchange ideas, feedback, resources, and practical advice. It's exciting to be in the recursive cycle of inquiry and to have so many partners to share and grow with.

* Explore Amanda's blog at <http://mysites-nndsb.nearnorthschools.ca/personal/brownleea/degagne/default.aspx>

In Sum

Whether educators use visual displays, document panels, bulletin boards, digital portfolios, or classroom blogs, the goal is documenting and valuing learners and learning. Documentation, as viewed by Carole Anne and Amanda, is a narrative, a way of telling learners' stories, and a way of sharing this exciting journey with the school community and families.

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