

SmartLearning: Enduring Impact

Background

A number of years ago the Okanagan Skaha School District decided to implement a system of teacher leadership through the District Literacy Helping Teachers. This was the starting point for involving teachers in the development of professional learning at the district level. As one of the literacy helping teachers, I was on the look-out for approaches, programs and materials that would have a high influence on teacher practice, and a high impact on student learning.

A few people in the district mentioned *SmartReading*, and the work of Susan Close. Many had been working with literacy practices that had come out of publications written or co-written by Susan, and they wanted to explore her new work in New Westminster. So began the journey that has followed a professional learning continuum from *SmartReading* and *SmartLearning* workshops, to side-by-side teaching, to *SmartLearning* Rounds in demonstration classrooms, to teacher research inquiry teams. To say all of this happened by *beginning with the end in mind* would be untruthful. Nevertheless the evolution of our initiative has followed a predictable course, and has led to changed teacher practice, a sustainable approach to professional learning, and to some dramatic gains in achievement.

Getting Started

To pique everyone's interest, we invited Susan Close to present a one day *SmartReading* workshop. Our teachers' summer professional development committee then invited Susan and a team of her K-12 facilitators to lead two days of summer workshops. Many teachers began implementing the practices. A few travelled to a *SmartReading* conference in New Westminster where they had an opportunity to see the *SmartLearning* practices in action, in K-12 district research teachers' classrooms, and to attend further workshops. These experiences kindled excitement and deeper implementation of the approach.

As a district, we began to gather a team of teachers who were successfully implementing aspects of *SmartReading* and *SmartLearning* in their classrooms – people excited by the effects of the approach, and interested in helping their teacher colleagues get started with the practices. Over the years the initiative changed from a focus on reading, to *SmartLearning* -- to emphasize that this training was for teachers of all subjects.

Going Deeper

Soon we had a team of demonstration leaders willing to open their classrooms to visitors, and willing to work with others side-by-side implementing the *SmartLearning* practices. The team of eight teachers, representing all grade levels, continued to have further training provided by Susan Close. The initiative then became funded by the Provincial Literacy Innovation Grant. For three years now we have offered *SmartLearning* Rounds, after school workshops, and summer professional development workshops for our district teachers.

The *SmartLearning* Round model of professional learning now in place in the district has been guided by Susan Close, and a number of her trainers. In the model Susan, or one of the trainers, works with the demonstration teachers to plan a learning sequence for others to observe -- a learning sequence designed to develop identified skills. Interested

classroom teachers meet for an hour before going into the classroom, to hear the thinking behind the plan and to set goals for seeing *SmartLearning* in action. During the observation the teachers have important work to do: they apply the principles of learning to their viewing, they do the same work as the learners, and they notice the effects of the work on themselves as learners and on the students. They then reflect -- sharing with the students important things they noticed about the learning. Following the classroom interaction, the participants use the principles of learning to analyze the learning, they assess the student work using performance scales, and they engage in planning. Following the learning rounds, and throughout the year, district teachers receive ongoing support. Teachers are reporting that this model offers the best professional development they have had, professional learning that leads to sustained teaching practices.

Reflections

"SmartLearning has been transformative in scope; educators are learning how to improve their skills as teachers and as instructional leaders."

- Superintendent of School District #67 June, 2009

"While observing the demonstration class today I became aware of the immense amount of learning taking place. Learning that is focused and purposeful. Learning that holds each and every person accountable for themselves."

- Vice-principal

"The growth of children's thinking is outstanding. There is tremendous enthusiasm that the children have for learning. In 33 years of teaching, the delight I see in children's writing and sharing of their work has been a long time coming, but it is here now."

- Teacher - SmartLearning round participant

"What a wonderful experience to have worked with other colleagues to develop a SmartLearning sequence. It was a very rewarding time - a lot of work, but the rewards of seeing the teacher growth and enthusiasm were worth it."

- SmartLearning demonstration teacher

"I was introduced to SmartReading in professional workshops. In my first couple of sequences I noticed the students were all able to participate; the approach was inclusive and all learners were on board."

- Student teacher

"When my grade 1 child came home and was talking about metacognition, I realized I had better start paying attention to what she was learning in school. My daughter doesn't realize that she is using these skills in everyday life, but she has taken our family arguments to a whole new level."

- Parent who has observed the effects of SmartLearning in grades 1 - 4 classrooms

Next Steps

This journey has opened the doors for teachers to have deeper, more meaningful conversations about how students learn, and has honoured the reflective practice of analyzing our own teaching. As we move into September, 2009 our district will have approximately twenty-five people participating in a teacher research inquiry around *SmartLearning*. The Teacher Inquiry Project is a pilot program by the BCTF PQT program, the program for quality teaching under the umbrellas of Pro-D and Research and Development. The Ministry of Education has provided financial support for this

project. The goal is to extend understanding of teaching practice through action research on teaching approaches and choices, and to encourage teacher experimentation with innovative practices and adaptation of curriculum and strategies to meet the needs of students. Our project will be funded by the BCTF, OSTU (Okanagan Skaha Teachers' Union) and School District #67.

In my work as a district helping teacher, I have been able to draw together groups of teachers from K to 12, and co-ordinate a program of teacher mentorship that has been astounding. The *SmartLearning* teacher leaders demonstrate tireless support for their fellow teachers because of their strong belief in the effects of the *SmartLearning* approach – on both teachers and students. So many teachers have reported to us that after many years of teaching they are excited about the endless possibilities for achieving student success in their classrooms.

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