

The Power of SmartLearning

February 23, 2012:

Educators participating in a **SmartLearning** Leadership PLC were asked to respond to:
*What strengths are you seeing in your learners after five months of work with SmartLearning??
How do you know?*

I am seeing more confident, happy and **ABLE** students in my classroom. They are truly taking charge of their learning. I know this because when I started a lesson **without** allowing time for kids to activate prior knowledge, make a prediction and wonder, they rebelled! One student came bolting up to my side and one student stood up to get my attention. They were not going to allow me to start a new topic (RCMP).without “getting the velcro ready.” I loved this!

My students can work more rigorously, with more success than ever before. They also have more stamina **and** made expectations of themselves. I know this because they always answer tasks with “because”, for example, “etc. ... because they **want** to justify why they think the way they do.

My students aren’t afraid of work and they know **why** they need to work. I know this because I can have them do a sequence chunk, independent reading and word work before they even need a break.

They are more collaborative. By collaborative I don’t mean relying on the strongest person to do all the thinking. They are pushing one another by having expectations of each other. No one gets a “ticket out” of a task, chunk, session, activity ... without doing the work! I could keep going...

Strengths in kids	How I know
1. work as a team	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• good cooperation• lots of conversation on topic• lots of positive feedback to each other
2. improve listening skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• students are able to explain the thinking of others• ask for clarification when needed• automatically ask “tell me more ...”
3. students justify regularly	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• students do not seem to have to search for justification. They justify when it isn’t a requirement• seem to have justification ready at same time as answer
4. <i>SmartLearning</i> skills are becoming embedded in students – just part of their day	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• observing them working with Mike: how they asked questions on the topic and made connections - all very naturally
5. retention of learned material	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• kids are scaffolding on previous knowledge and returning to it regularly as they make connections
6. desire to learn]	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• as a visitor in a grade 4 classroom engaged in a sequence, kids who had previous experience with <i>SmartLearning</i> were very anxious and excited to do all activities. Again, retention was high, questions were deep!
7. kids are going deeper in their thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• discussions and questions showed deep thought and evaluation of thinking

8. success to all

- in spite of the lower academic reading/writing performance these kids are focused and making deep connections

Strengths I am seeing

- some willing to talk to partners, some not yet comfortable with the talk structures
 - reduced bullying issues
 - students analyzing importance of concepts and why they are important
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What I was seeing is the enjoyment and freedom of the class structure. Students that are your typical nonparticipants are coming to class early to set-up for the routine. They are engaged. They are becoming more confident readers, **because the respect is there from their classmates**. The levels of ability are gone, replaced with a feeling that they are all learners and contributors. They take responsibility for their own learning which I feel is the key.

Accountability Structure

Their work has connections to the outside world and 'the why' is it important.

How do I know ... by the thousand questions they ask me.

The students are:

- more aware of thinking processes and excited to do the deeper level thinking
 - able to vocalize what they are doing and why
 - embracing the "frame" for speaking out and use them on other work
 - not as timid to do quick draws or quick sketches of their thinking – hesitant when we started showing our thinking visually, but now get right to work
 - respecting the brain and what it needs – quiet time is quiet reflective thinking and seem happy to be quiet since they have had ample opportunity to talk and share their thinking before they put thoughts to paper
 - sense of community – working together for a common purpose
 - confident in their skills and willing to tackle harder material since they have strategies to use
 - more observant of students speaking "with authority". They know that what they have to say matters.
 - seeing an application of word patterns in other work – WordWork is building confidence in their ability to write down their thinking
 - becoming better at creating visual images that enable them to remember what a story was about a week later and to create powerful writing – there is evidence of details and strong vocabulary
 - writing is further developed at this time of year than it has been in the past; using frames like: First, Next, Last
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Overall, in Language Arts I see a group of students who used to be individuals and now work as a community. I see that many have improved in their social skills through familiarity with the talk-structures we use during learning sequences. I do not have one student who will not stand up and eloquently speak out. **Even my chosen mute!**

In my assessment of their writing I find their answers to be deeper and the connections stronger. One of my most reluctant students wrote at a level that blew me away. She is receptive to partner-work and it is reflected in her writing level. She now has to be the first to share in a group of 3. Before she would completely shut down if she was asked to go first!

My pace is faster with more engagement, and my students thrive on this.

I did a short story 3 times with 3 different classes and experimented: 1. traditional, 2. mix, 3. *SmartLearning* sequences. The 3rd time with *SmartLearning* it was amazing to see the level of engagement and enjoyment. Same task; better responses!

I am seeing my students improve greatly in the way that they are connecting. At first connecting was once I read a book that had an explorer in it. Now students are naming the characters and comparing how the characters relate to each other.

I am also seeing the communication between students work well during partner-talk. At first they would get off task. Now students dive into the conversation and challenge each other to go deeper.

Reporting out has been one aspect of *SmartLearning* my students gravitate to. They want to share and instinctively stand up. Students are sad if we don't hear from all groups, as they want to be part of the discussion. Some students still need to write out the framework but most can share with ease.

Social skills – building community through A/B partnering, G•O•S•S•I•P and RASA

- working together for a common purpose
 - sharing thinking
 - everybody can participate
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Strengths I am seeing in my learners

- **Reporting-out using frames:** my students are more willing to take risks and share their thoughts and ideas with their classmates. I see it as strength because they are learning from each other.
- **Goal setting and reflecting:** my students are demonstrating clear s-t-r-e-t-c-h goals with plans and justifications, and can readily reflect on their learning. They are more accountable learners and know exactly what they need to focus on. They have also shown a lot of growth when building criteria.
- **Classroom community and coaching:** I saw a lot of powerful coaching during my recent learning round. This I see as strength because they are demonstrating great team work and compassion for each other. I enter my classroom and can feel the respectful atmosphere.
- **Improved writing:** students are more willing to put pencil to paper and actually write down their ideas – improved writing helps students make connections and helps them focus on the 'Big Ideas'.
- **The structure of the Independent *SmartReading*** has made my students more accountable for their reading and has guided them to demonstrate the skills they need to comprehend text.

Hardest questions:

1. What are the expectations for students that are 2-3 grade levels behind?
 2. What is going to happen next year for these students? What is their learning going to look like?
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My kids are confident they have something to offer in class. They believe they are capable of success if they engage in the task. This is demonstrated to me every day by their positive attitudes when they enter the classroom, how easily they transition into our groups, and how engaged they are during our class time together. The conversations I hear at the tables and the explanations of their work have left me with a feeling of awe ... of the power of community happening in our classroom.

Other teachers have had issues with this class that I just don't see, or would ever imagine seeing with them! I have observed them in different classes and have witnessed that they are a completely different culture in my classroom. They are respectful and supportive of others learning with me.

Strengths

I am noticing that my kids are asking deeper questions and are looking for evidence in people's answers; kids are developing stronger writing skills by elaborating on their thoughts. In their spelling I am seeing kids applying the patterns they are learning through the work with the Words Their Way routines. They apply the patterns to their spelling tests and in their writing.

Through their reading they are learning how to influence, as they take the information and develop a clear explanation of why they conclude that.

Through all this I am seeing my kids take risks, feel successful, and become engaged with their studies: high task → high engagement → motivated students.

My learners are better engaged during sharing or oral part of the teaching. I know this because of the hand signals they are using to indicate the connections, new ideas and questions coming into their thinking.

My learners are better writers. I know this because I have evidence from the classroom. They are **all** adding more detail and description. They are also aware that "more" doesn't always mean "better".

My learners are better reflectors. I know this because of the feedback they give themselves and others, based on criteria.

My le

arners are better group members and team players. I know this because I observe their A/B partner talk and coaching skills. I watch them be supportive and congratulatory.

My learners are more accountable. I know this because of their efforts to justify their thinking and work.

Question:

How do you time manage to teach all of the curricular expectations effectively, and fully implement *SmartLearning*?

I am joining the leadership conversation from another division, for the first time. I have seen some of the practices demonstrated by a leader in our school, and by a trainer in a recent learning round. What I observed as strengths in the classrooms were: positive student engagement. I saw students working positively; their conversations showed critical thinking beyond what would normally occur. I also observed students working together – unity – which provides an opportunity to develop many social skills. I observed increased acceptance, positive open mindedness in student conversations and behaviour. I saw benefits of brain research being infused into the learning as I noticed the ‘talk’ made learning real to the students. That kind of learning has the power to be long lasting and to ignite the spark for life-long learners.

My students are more willing to share their learning because they have had support from their peers, and they know their thinking is valued and can be refined. I’m seeing stronger images in their writing as well as a growing ability to make connections to previous learning, and to the world around them. Partner-talk is more focused and purposeful than it was in the beginning, and students are recognizing that it is okay to “borrow” ideas and integrate them into their own thinking. The safe and respectful learning community is becoming a stronger factor in our learning, but will continue to need strengthening. I see the effects of the learning community when students are collaborating, when they work on their own, through their partner-talk and reporting out, and through their finished writing. Their learning logs also reveal a growing awareness of the role of goal-setting, and the need to choose “*just right*” goals that are achievable. They are getting better at identifying appropriate evidence of reaching their goals as well.

Hardest questions:

1. Planning the learning – finding appropriate resources and having the time to plan really well so that I’ve met my outcomes.
 2. Students who are resistant to this way of learning.
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Strengths I am seeing...

Using A/B partner-talk has given my students empowerment – a personal sense of power - with how they communicate with others. They are much more assertive in how their friends are feeling. If others hurt, they want to help – knowing everyone will be treated with dignity and respect.

Having the students sketch or draw gives them more focus with the activating of background knowledge and keeps them focussed on what they are going to work on – either writing or reading. I am hearing more insightful conversations. Students feel more in charge of their learning.

Seeing others implementing the *SmartLearning* practices gives me incentive to try more *Smartlearning*. Seeing the results others are getting makes me want to try more *SmartLearning* strategies.

Moving from A/B partner-talk to working on paper is a strength.

I need to have the papers out and available so that I am more apt to use the *SmartLearning* sheets rather than blank pieces of paper.

Strengths in my learners ...

I am seeing a continual improvement in children’s ability to speak to the class, and increase in their confidence with communicating. I know this because students often share with others easily. Each time we work on a skill and take it to a different level, I see improvement – questioning, predicting, connecting, inferring, summarizing, etc. I see the improvement through the quality of oral awareness that is shared with partners and the class. I also see the improvement in written ideas. Both are manifestation of their higher level of thinking. Although I am seeing improvement, I am also continually getting feedback about weaker areas that need more work in my class. I like having this feedback as it gives me direction for my teaching. Some of my students are finding the challenge of deeper thinking uncomfortable; these tend to be some of my bright students that are not used to being challenged.

My lower students are enjoying the movement and talking opportunities, and are incredibly engaged. I noticed this in their interactions and in the increased involvement I am seeing from them.

Hardest questions ... challenges

The scheduling of *SmartLearning* during my day is my hardest challenge. I find the amount of time it takes is hard to work in.

For assessment: I would like to see a display of work in different subject areas.

Strengths

This year I am focusing on two areas of the curriculum where our students show weakness: inference, and confidence and risk-taking with new material. Both of these areas are starting to show growth. I have always felt that they are connected, and find this to be the truth. The non-judgemental/safe atmosphere built around the *SmartLearning* process encourages students to take chances. Students are starting to do new things on assignments. They are less looking for the fill-in-the-blank answers and showing more "What if?" type of thinking. The question "Why is this important?" now actually has students volunteering answers. I actually brought in a video by Stephen Hawking on the origin of the universe to show my grade 6 class where we were in science. There were great questions and thoughtful answers for over an hour after the video. My hockey-enthusiast boy gathered four pages of notes on the video. This is still a work in progress, but I see progress.

Strengths I am seeing...

- **Confidence:** students seem far more confident and willing to take risks. As *Smartlearning* has grown in my school, and as more students are exposed to *Smartlearning* I notice **all** students are becoming confident risk takers. Even students that wouldn't have ever spoken out are willing to participate and take part in the learning.
 - **High quality work:** it isn't about quantity anymore. It is about quality. Every student can produce high quality work because it is so individualized. I see more growth in students.
 - **Common language/expectations from classroom to classroom:** In our school *SmartLearning*-talk has premeditated almost every classroom.
 - *SmartLearning* has forced me to ask some tough questions of myself about what is important I have streamlined what I do; refocused to make sure that everything I do is important, and has a purpose.
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The strengths I see in my kids:

- **The ability to share their thinking with their partner.** I know this because they are collaborating all the time.
 - **The ability to express their thoughts or their partner's thoughts to the class, in an eloquent manner.** They make their own frame if I don't give them one. They use the *Powerful Speaker* criteria from their head when sharing.
 - **The ability to image and write about their thinking.** All of my students are immediately engaged when they have to write or draw.
 - **The ability to add details to their writing.** They are making revisions and additions every time the opportunity is given, and they love Microsoft Word's Thesaurus
 - **The ability to write in role.** Such wonderful stories emerged of what happened in "The Humming Bird" with the fire and the animals.
 - **The ability to justify.** They can spell the word 'justify' correctly because they use it so much, and I hear them say "You need a because."
 - **The ability to make connections, predictions and ask questions.** I know because I hear them use the phrase, "My connection to ..." or "I have a connection ..." in all subject areas
 - **The willingness to share ideas and coach.** They share ideas with the class in a team and they jump in to help if they see anyone who is stuck for words. I hear "Can I coach them?" lots.
 - **The ability to be a respectful listener for an incredible amount of time.** 1 ½ hours flies by and all of us are amazed when the bell goes for recess, lunch or home.
 - **The passion they have for learning.** I hear my students say how much they love _____ and they don't want to stop or they want to stay.
 - **The effort they will put into their thinking on paper.** I know because they all try to put more down and improve their work.
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Strengths in the learners

- **Self confidence:** timid children have become self-confident learners who are able to stand up and speak in front of peers, and feel their thoughts are valued. They are actually excited to stand up and report-out
- **Taking control of their learning:** now that they know the routines for the *SmartLearning* sequence work, independent reading, and word work, they just want to get on with the jobs. I have to make sure to give them a heads-up way ahead of time, if a task is going to be different or they independently go ahead.
- **Growth:** they are able to express thoughts orally, and in written form with more ease and higher thinking. “Everyone” has ideas, not just the bright lights.
- **Community:** everyone sees the value of listening to others. The playing field has been leveled. They want to help each other and usually go to a peer first for help.
- **Students are always looking for connections in whatever we are doing:** they are using these skills at home; parents have commented that they are using *Smart* language at home.
- **Spelling skills from *WordWork* are transferring into independent writing.**
- **Strong vocabulary from the sequence work is transferring into writing.**

Strengths in my learners:

My grade eights entered their work in September unable to find a main idea in a paragraph – students at all levels. Not only can they now distill the essence of a paragraph, the skill has extended to Science as well. Their Science teacher also noticed the gain in skills. I praised them after Christmas when I realized how far they’d come.

This semester with my English 10/20-2 split I have focused on building community and confidence. My proudest moment was seeing the looks on their faces when they received their Quick Writes back from the previous day, with strengths highlighted on each one. I asked them to “Tell me what you did well.” Some of them were literally swelling with pride because they knew it was an authentic moment of praise. Through establishing the task and criteria with them, they knew it was praise for achievement.

Linking stories and poems through images and personal connections is without a doubt the most professionally impactful change – to be mindful of how things are connected – to provide **context** for students.

Writing in role has been a powerful tool as well. After reading, *All the tears of her life*, the students had a choice of writing as the mother or the son. The insights of this allegedly non-academic group were moving and deep. By immersing them deeply in the stories and characters, it almost feels- in the best sense of the word - like I’m “tricking” them into depth analysis. In three weeks we’ve delved more deeply into elements of fiction with more retention, learning that would have taken months in the past... I’ve been using images and video to teach figures of speech, and I’ll never go back to traditionally teaching. I know I’m successful when I read their daily writing, and when I listen to them when we connect the next day. They are on task, focused, and behaviour issues, after the initial testing are rare.

Hardest questions:

How to reach the six students that the *SmartLearning* process doesn’t seem to “work” for...

Discipline issues with a few still eclipse the experience at times.

Strengths I am seeing in my students:

Use of powerful words: In their written work the use of adjectives and *exciting* verbs has become common practice. The students are so excited and enthusiastic about thinking of a new *powerful* word, and using it in their writing.

I showcase their writing, and when other students hear the new word, they are often anxious to use it in their own writing. We are no longer **protective** of our words, realizing it is a compliment if someone chooses to use it.

The quality of writing has improved. The importance of using descriptive language outweighs the need for quantity. I find fewer pages of repetitive ideas i.e. going on and on, saying the same thing over and over again. Now their ideas are presented in a much clearer and concise manner. This is because they have an opportunity to share their ideas/sentences before they start writing. Everyone has shared at least one sentence before they begin writing, so “I don’t know what to write” is no longer acceptable or an option.

A/B partners: my students are becoming more attentive listeners. Discussions are on topic more with sharing our ideas.

Strengths

1. **When students and teachers (both learners) are sharing their learning;** talking about strategies from a student – teacher perspective, I know there’s learning going on that will keep them engaged.
2. My own grade 4 students are always **surprised when “break times” are called** because they feel their learning is being disrupted. We don’t have bells.
3. **Teachers doing “common planning” and sharing techniques** in the hall during breaks.
4. **Assessment is stronger and more deliberate** when teachers and students know the purpose and expected outcomes.
5. **Teachers in my school:** some are beginning to grasp *SmartLearning* and use the practices in the classroom with great anticipation, and are eager to share how the “lesson” went. Other teachers, including myself spur on and enjoy this excitement. This channels more eagerness and anticipation within the learning environment – all staff becoming involved. “Starters with practice” will never go back to the traditional ways.
6. *SmartLearning* practices are encouraging us all to be more thoughtful and effective as teachers. Students see themselves as mindful learners where being an “excelling” student or having produced an “excelling” assignment is something to be proud of. *SmartLearning* changes the notion of what assessment means and how it is managed effectively.
7. My class enjoys new strategies that come from *SmartLearning* and they definitely prefer these methods over more traditional ones.
 - I generally haven’t put *SmartLearning* into my lesson plans when I get a “sub” in, but need to start doing this because it’s how the students enjoy learning. On some “sub” days, the effectiveness of the learning is often lessened.
8. Parents and others are keen about what’s going on, and enjoy hearing about *SmartLearning* strategies and how they impact children’s learning.

