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## GETTING DOWN TO THE REAL BUSINESS OF SCHOOL

Mary M. Dekker

A few years ago I had the opportunity to hear Julie Jensen speak at the Michigan State University/MCTE Spring Conference on the Language Arts. What she said about learning both confirmed and challenged the beliefs I had held for a long time. Using the following examples, she talked about the memorable and instructive teachers she had. From her school years she remembered making butter and setting up a grocery store, visiting the state capitol, constructing a *papier maché* giraffe, and identifying an unknown element. In her speech and later in an article entitled "Toward Teachers Defining Good Teaching," she argued that these types of activities were not "enrichment experiences intended to occur after the 'real' business of the school is conducted. They are the real business of the school" (8). She furthered her argument when she said that a student "cannot engage in experiences such as these without learning how to learn, without becoming a better listener, speaker, reader, and writer, to say nothing about learning lessons in the social studies, science, and mathematics" (8).

In her speech Jensen confirmed my beliefs that learning should be active, social, meaningful, and enjoyable. But as she spoke, I thought about how often I fell short of this goal and tacked on the enjoyable and meaningful parts of learning at the end of a more conventional lesson or unit of study. As I made plans for the following school year, her phrase "the real business of the school" was always on my mind. This phrase validated all the kinds of activities I wanted to do with my class but was afraid to do for fear that they would be viewed as fluff, or enrichment, but not work—the stuff that is "supposed" to happen in school.

A project I had thought about doing several times was the making of a classroom dinosaur museum. We studied dinosaurs in science. We studied about museums in Social Studies. We read and wrote various types

of texts. Here was an opportunity to take an interdisciplinary approach to teaching and learning, as well as a time to let students work together on something I was sure would be meaningful and enjoyable to them.

When I first mentioned the idea of making our classroom into a dinosaur museum, my second graders were excited. I explained in general terms how we could set up various displays in our room so it would be like a real museum. I then explained to them that we could invite parents and other classrooms to our museum so that they could learn from our displays and see the work we had done.

We began the project by brainstorming ideas for the types of activities and displays to include in the museum. The majority of the ideas we used came from the students themselves. Some of their suggested displays were dinosaur drawings and information sheets, clay models of dinosaurs, plaster of paris prints of leaves, shells, and other materials that looked like fossils, murals, full-scale drawings of dinosaur parts (the horn of Triceratops, the plate of Stegosaurus), a book display, a student-written dinosaur magazine, and a hands-on activity area. In the hall outside our room foot-long strips of paper were hung to show the comparative length of several dinosaurs, from the relatively small Comagnathus (2 feet long) to the Selsmosaurus (100 feet long).

All of these activities went beyond the boundaries of our second grade science book, as well as any language arts text for second graders. As it was with the memorable events from Jensen's schooling, "we began with things worth doing, then, moved by our interest, acquired the necessary skills" (12). Because of the interdisciplinary nature of the dinosaur museum project, the students not only learned about dinosaurs, but also about math, social studies, and all of the language arts: reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

Speaking and listening were important to our development of the museum. For example, three girls worked together to figure out what to do with a bulletin board. They decided the colors for the background and border, the caption, and how to fill up the board. This involved speaking and listening to each other. This was true for all the various displays that we did. Students talked and listened to each other as they worked to solve the particular problems of the display at hand.

## LANGUAGE ARTS JOURNAL OF MICHIGAN

Students were also involved in speaking and listening when one student was teaching another how to do something. One example of this is that I only taught one boy how to use transfer letters to make a sign. He taught everyone else who used them.

When the museum opened for other classes to see, my students became the museum workers. Some welcomed the classes and talked about the hall displays while others were stationed at the various displays within the classroom. As classes came by their station, the students in charge explained the display. At the "How Big" display, for example, my students told the visiting students that the skull of Tyrannosaurus was as big as a calf. They picked up a basketball and explained how the large dinosaurs, like the Brachiosaurus or Apatosaurus, had eggs that size.

The students told me later that they enjoyed and learned from this experience. One girl said it was fun to tell "other kids what you know." Another student said he enjoyed "talking to other teachers and kids about stuff in the room." A third student, a boy whose favorite station was a nest display of a Malsaura dinosaur, said that "the more you talked about it the more you learned." One boy summed it up this way: "When the museum was opened you learned more than you knew before." These students experienced the joy that comes with talking about something you know. But more than that, they discovered that talking about a topic can deepen one's understanding.

Reading and writing skills were almost as pervasive as listening and speaking skills as the museum project progressed. The large drawings of dinosaurs, for example, were accompanied by information sheets which included the length and weight of the dinosaur, as well as where it was found. These sheets also contained interesting facts. The students learned to skim for particular information as they did these sheets. They discovered, too, that this type of information was easier to locate in books like *Dial-A-Dinosaur* and *The Dinosaur Encyclopedia*, since these books often listed certain factual information above the text. Several students learned how to use an index and taught their friends this useful skill. Another group expressed an interest in making full-scale drawings of parts of various dinosaurs, an activity for which research was needed. The students who wanted to draw a skull of Tyrannosaurus, for example, had to do some reading to find out how long the skull was as well as how long the teeth were.

The students voiced their questions about dinosaurs during every science discussion and while we worked on the displays. The questions were as unique as the children who asked them: Did it ever rain or snow in the time of the dinosaurs? What did Tyrannosaurus eat after the other dinosaurs died? What was the last dinosaur to survive? Was the Earth empty between the time of dinosaurs and people? Did Tyrannosaurus ever get bruised by Ankylosaurus? We decided to use these questions as a source for some dinosaur reports that we intended to put together in a dinosaur magazine. A copy of the magazine was to be given to each class who visited the museum.

The first part of this report-writing activity involved identifying five questions about the topic that the report would answer. Some students asked all five questions about one particular dinosaur while others asked various unrelated questions they had. Since I wanted the students' own questions to shape the reports, rather than the text of the first book they picked up, I required that the question sheets be handed in before the actual research began.

Once the students had their questions, they were ready to look for the information in books. I modeled how to do this with a set of questions I had about Triceratops. For each question I showed the students how to skim a text until I found an answer—much like what they had already done on other projects. I made a note of the answer—much like what they had already done on other projects. I made a note of the answer next to the question. I also pointed out that the answer to a question might not be in the first book they picked up—that they might have to look in several places to find the answer.

During this research phase, several students helped each other locate answers to questions. For example, two boys who had questions about Tyrannosaurus told each other when they found information. Another boy told me how he worked with two girls who, like him, had questions about Ankylosaurus. He said that they looked through almost the whole box of books. Anytime one of them found some information about Ankylosaurus, he or she shared it with the others.

When the students were ready to draft the report itself, I began the process by modelling how to move from questions and answers to a written report. I took each question and answer, asked the students how the information could be composed into a sentence, and recorded it on the overhead projector.

After this modelling, they were ready to write. The texts of two reports follow.

#### Brachiosaurus

Brachiosaurus ate ferns and pine needles.  
Brachiosaurus was the heaviest dinosaur of all.  
Brachiosaurus lived in eastern Africa.  
Brachiosaurus could breathe under water because it had ear-shaped nostrils.  
Brachiosaurus might have been gray, green, or brown.

#### The Boney Head

Paleontologists think Stegoceras might have been colored in camouflage. His skull was six inches thick. He ran fairly fast. He fought with his thick boney head.

The dinosaur magazine activity provided time for students to work together on a project that was personally meaningful. The reports were important to the students since they were able to identify their own questions, and they knew that other classes would see their reports in the published magazine. For example, the above report on Stegoceras arose from an interest one boy had in the dinosaurs with the thick skulls. Another student expressed an interest in the woolly mammoth. Even though it was not a dinosaur, it was an extinct animal she had questions about. I let her research and write about the woolly mammoth since this was where her interest was. Her research led her to the library several times to find the meaning of the words "woolly mammoth." Her report follows.

#### Woolly Mammoth

Woolly mammoth ate flowers, pine needles, moss and pine cones. His enemy was the saber tooth tiger. It was found in Siberia in 1901. Cave men used him for tent frames and burned his bones for fire. Necklaces were made from the tusks. His name means first born elephant.

All students worked on a dinosaur report, but some students also were involved in other forms of writing. One girl wrote the following letter of invitation to the teaching staff.

Dear Teachers,

Please bring your class to the second grade Dinosaur Museums. It will be fun. Kids will talk about Dinosaur stuff. Dates: Feb. 22 and Feb. 23. Please sign up on the sign up sheet.

From this letter we see that the student not only understands how to write a letter—something that might be drilled with worksheets in a language arts text—but writes it with a particular purpose, including pertinent information to any teacher who wishes to bring his or her class for a visit to the displays. One boy wrote a similar letter to the parents, explaining to them the type of work we had done and inviting them to the museum. Another boy came up with the idea of making a short but dramatic thank-you note to give to all the teachers who brought their classes to the museum: a large picture of Stegosaurus with the caption, "Thank you for coming."

A few years ago I would have written letters like the ones above myself. However, as the museum project progressed, I became more determined to let the students do their own projects, solve their own problems, and summon their teacher's help only when necessary. During the museum project, functional types of writing like these were a natural outgrowth of what we were doing. And, since the students were creating the museum, I felt they were also the ones who should write the letters that invited the public to come.

In *Stories to Grow On*, Jensen reminds us that "an effective language arts curriculum cannot be based on textbooks or texts. It must be centered on the learner" (15). As my class and I worked toward our goal of the classroom dinosaur museum, we were not bound by prescribed language lessons or watered-down science curricula. Students worked on projects of their choice where the only constraints were time, imagination, and energy. Also, throughout our work on the dinosaur museum, whatever it was we were working on, we were always using the language arts—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—to learn.

Fifteen classrooms, several parents, and various other adults visited our dinosaur museum. What the students liked best about this project varied. Many of them liked being museum workers while others enjoyed making particular displays. Each student found this type of school work

## LANGUAGE ARTS JOURNAL OF MICHIGAN

meaningful and enjoyable. I knew then that this teacher had gotten down to "the real business of the school."

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