Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 14
Issue 2 *Moving Toward Best Practice*

Article 4

1998

Reflecting on Best Practice

Mary Dekker

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Dekker, Mary (1998) "Reflecting on Best Practice," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 14: Iss. 2, Article 4.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1409>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Reflecting On Best Practice

Mary Dekker

Somewhere in the second decade of teaching elementary school, I began to dread the beginning of each new school year. It wasn't that I wanted to do something else. I still loved the kids and loved working with them, but I was well aware of the cost of each school year. I knew I would often be overwhelmed with work, with challenging students, with difficult parents or administrators, or with school improvement efforts. To get myself motivated in the second half of my career, I've often pulled out a videotape of my students working on a second-grade dinosaur museum.

Turning our classroom into a dinosaur museum was one of the big accomplishments in my classroom. Watching the video always left me hopeful of what was possible. Viewing what was possible made it easier to accept the inevitability of all the challenges the year would hold. Viewing the video also helped me realize each summer that creating a classroom community that could produce this kind of engagement was what I wanted to be doing.

One Day in the Making of a Dinosaur Museum

As the video begins, the classroom is filled with activity. It is noisy, but it is the good noise of students talking about the projects they are doing. As the camera pans across the room, the first thing I notice is the students who are engaged in many different projects. What commands my attention in the first few minutes is a group of four students headed by Scott. They are preparing the paper they will use to draw the neck of Mamenchiasaurus, the dinosaur with the longest neck, about 33 feet long. They begin on one side of the classroom and make their way to the other side with fanfold computer paper to give them the desired length. Other students who are working at their desks or who are also trying to get across the classroom are asked to "move please." Their activity draws interest and

questions.

"What's that for?" Nicky asks.

"It's for the neck of Mamenchiasaurus," Scott says. "Its neck would stretch all the way across our classroom."

"Wow. Did you hear that?" Nicky says to Patti. "That's how long the neck would be!"

Once the paper is stretched completely across the room, the group falls out of view as they work on the floor, taping all the folds, and finally drawing the head and neck of Mamenchiasaurus.

Other students come into view. Angela works alone at her desk, researching the lengths of dinosaurs for a project we will do with another classroom in the hall. She sits with her list of dinosaurs and her dinosaur encyclopedia.

Tommy and Jeff are on the floor working on a dinosaur time line. On their poster paper is a line depicting the three periods in which the dinosaurs lived. In piles around them are dinosaur encyclopedias and stencils to draw the dinosaurs. As I walk by, I ask them how it's going.

"Well, pretty good, now," Jeff says.

"What was the matter?" I ask.

"Well, Tommy thought this side was the beginning and I thought the other side was the beginning, but now we have it figured out."

"Good."

Jill and Tricia are writing a letter to the teachers in our building to invite them to bring their classes to the dinosaur museum. They sit at a table with their notes of the dates and times to include in the letter. "How's this?" Jill asks as I walk by. I quickly scan the letter and say, "What you have is good, but you haven't told them what they will see when they come to the museum."

"Oops," Jill says. "Let's write down all the stuff kids are doing."

Richard and Melissa work on a diorama display of extinction—a box with several divisions that shows some of the various theories of extinction

including a meteor hitting the Earth and the climate getting colder.

Bob and Ron have finished a banner that reads: "Welcome to the Dinosaur Museum." They hold it proudly and smile.

Jason works alone writing the text that will accompany the big picture we have colored of a dinosaur nest. He sits at a desk with a dinosaur book open, reading and taking notes.

As I watch myself on the tape, I see that I talk to one group of students, find them the materials they need, and answer questions with others. I don't stop to discipline. We are all engaged.

At one point near the end, I see Valentine's bags filled with cards pushed to one side on the counter. I realize then, that this was taped on a Valentine's Day before the classroom party. Having taught long enough to know how wound up students can be on party days, I appreciate the level of student engagement even more.

Glimpses of Best Practice

In *Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning In America's Schools*, Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde describe thirteen principles of best practice. While many of the elements were evident on the videotape, I would like to focus on six. As I viewed the tape I saw the students engaged in activities that were: child-centered, experiential, authentic, social, collaborative, and cognitive.

Building on children's natural curiosity about dinosaurs led to the creation of the dinosaur museum. But this was not the only way in which the museum project took on the element of child-centeredness. Part of the learning the students engaged in was to brainstorm questions they had about dinosaurs. Students also chose dinosaurs they wanted to research. Many chose Tyrannosaurus Rex, but others chose the docile duckbills or lesser known dinosaurs like Coelophysis.

After doing some initial background information on dinosaurs, the students brainstormed the types of projects they wanted to see in the museum. These ideas were put on a list. While no class ever did everything they brainstormed, they all did some of them, and the students could see how their suggestions were being used.

The flurry of activity on the videotape was experiential. In *Best Practice*, experiential learning is described as "active, hands-on" and the "most powerful and natural form of learning"(7). The group of students working on the Mamenchiasaurus neck had a good sense of how long 33 feet was after drawing and coloring that long, long neck. They were often overheard asking, "Does anyone have any extra brown crayons? This neck is really long."

Once, after several minutes of coloring, they shook their arms out but then got back to work.

The authentic nature of the dinosaur museum was evident to the students from the beginning. They knew their parents and other classrooms would visit. They worked on their projects with this in mind. There was a sense of purpose to all the research. The girl, who was researching the lengths of the dinosaurs, shared this information with her group as they prepared to show the relative lengths of several dinosaurs in the hall. There was a sense of doing "real" work. One day we had to break for gym while we were working on museum projects. As we reentered the classroom one boy said, "Okay everybody, get to work, get to work, get to work. We have a museum coming up."

Only four students worked on the long dinosaur neck, but by the end of that work period everyone knew what dinosaur it was, how long the neck was, and that it was the longest neck of any long-necked dinosaur. Knowledge about dinosaurs was socially constructed in other ways, too. Once in an interview a girl told me she had learned a lot about dinosaurs just by listening to one of the boys in the room talk about what he knew. And I noticed how there were some skills I taught only to a few students quickly, as needed, such as using an index to find information, that soon most of the class understood and used.

Working on the projects that would become our classroom dinosaur museum provided abundant opportunities for collaboration. Students often formed groups around a certain interest. One year, two boys created a display which showed the spikes on the tail of Stegosaurus, the teeth of Tyrannosaurus, the horns on Triceratops—the various types of armor and weapons dinosaurs had. Other students who enjoyed working with a friend, chose first to work together, and then found a task to do. But collaboration occurred in less structured ways also. The students turned to each other for the answers to questions. And not just ones like "where is the tape," but "do you know where I could find information on dinosaur nests?" And when a student didn't know the answer, she could often suggest another student who might.

The volumes of information the students learned about dinosaurs far surpassed the district science objectives for this unit. All the students knew the basic information about how scientists got information from fossils, some of the theories of extinction, and the specific adaptations of meat and plant-eating dinosaurs. In terms of the cognitive nature of the work, the students tackled much harder questions on their own including: What did the dinosaurs do all day? Did Ankylosaurus ever club a Tyrannosaurus? What dinosaurs were found

in the United States? Were any found in Michigan? What was the first dinosaur found? What was the last? Who was the biggest dinosaur? Who was the smallest? Who was the fastest? Who was the most fierce?

Reflecting on Best Practice

When I attempted the first museum about ten years ago, I was looking for an activity that my second- and third-grade combined class could work on together. Intuitively I thought the students would love it, but I never would have guessed it would be so successful. Every year, as my students work on the museum projects there is a sense in the classroom of going about meaningful work. I get more work out of them. More cooperation. More depth in the writing they do. More collaboration with others. More of a sense of community. And fewer behavior problems. This is our classroom dinosaur museum. We are doing this together.

Every year, whether I am teaching second or third graders, whether we are doing a dinosaur museum or an Earth museum, we do our best work as we work on the museum. I am doing my best teaching. They are doing their best learning. This makes for best practice.

Conclusion

Let me close with a final story. Earlier, I mentioned how a group of students had worked on the neck of Mamenchiasaurus. One afternoon after they finished coloring and cutting out the neck, they began the laborious task of applying lots of tape to the back of it. When they finished, they told me it was ready to be put up. As I looked at the clock, I realized that we only had ten minutes to go until the students were to be dismissed. And, we had a room that looked like a tornado had gone through—books, paper from projects, scrap paper, markers and colored pencils, were all out on the floor, on the tables, and covering the desks. It was always hard to motivate them through the clean up. Everyone had worked hard and was not ready to hurry and clean up. But after several tries, I got the class moving.

Then I turned to the group with the neck. "Okay, we're going to put this up on the wall now. I'll take the head, you guys hold the rest of it."

The task began well. I placed the head and the

first few feet of neck on the wall while several students stood on the floor holding several more feet of the neck. Then it started to rip.

Scott, whose voice always got higher as he got excited said, "It's starting to rip. It's starting to rip. It's starting to rip!"

I turned on the chair I was standing on and yelled out to the class who was now diligently cleaning up. "Does anyone have the tape?"

I tried again. "We need some tape!" I repeated the message several times. Scott was now screeching, "Somebody, anybody we need tape over here."

Finally, we were rescued with a roll of masking tape. I fixed the rip and then had three students stand on chairs at different spots across the front of the room. Getting the neck off the ground kept it from ripping again. As I moved my chair, the three students moved theirs. On and on across the room we went until the last foot of Mamenchiasaurus was up above our chalkboard. We stood back to admire it. It looked great.

Tommy said, "Wow, that is really long."

"Yeah," Scott said, "you should have colored it!"

"Okay, guys, you did a good job cleaning up. Now we need to pack our bags and get in line to go home."

"Oh," Jason groaned.

"What? You're not ready to go home?" I asked.

"No, you didn't read to us from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* today."

"No, I didn't. But today we put up the neck of Mamenchiasaurus."

"I know, but I really like it when you read to us."

Secretly, I missed the oral reading to the class that day, too. But I thought then, and remember now, this was a wonderful ending to a day. The students had worked hard right up until it was time to go home. And they left wanting more.

Works Cited

Zemelman, Steven, Harvey Daniels, and Arthur Hyde. *Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America's Schools*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Boynton/Cook, 1993.

About the Author

Mary Dekker, co-editor of LAJM, is in her twenty-fourth year of teaching at Morrice Elementary school in Morrice, Michigan.