



Lisa Burman

Consulting in Pedagogical Change

Language of Learning

November 2015



Reflect and Refresh

The end of a calendar or school year always brings with it a sense of ending and also of beginning again when we look forward to the possibilities of the new year. Recently, I've been spending a lot of time reflecting on my consulting business and feel like it's time for some things to be 'refreshed'. It's all part of growing, learning and evolving as an educator, and in my case, as a business owner! I'm certainly on a big learning curve with that last role.

This time to reflect and refresh is so empowering though! I'm *truly* excited (*don't' you feel we over-use that word a little these days?*)...I AM excited about the opportunities and possibilities that are emerging. I've been learning how to create and manage e-Courses – wow! I've still got lots to learn, particularly with the technical side of things. The learning processes have helped me clarify my thinking and also led me to decide that it is time for some professional 'branding'. I'm currently meeting with different designers to collaborate with. Hopefully next year, *Lisa Burman Consultants* will have a new look! A bit of styling advice never hurt anyone...

Professional Learning in 2016

Our 2016 Professional Learning Calendar will be published before the end of the school year and we have a few new offerings for you.

Writing Study Group – a year-long professional inquiry into the teaching of writing, whether you use Bookmaking or Writer's Notebook approaches. Almost full already!

Illustrators Think Like Writers Too! – a new Twilight workshop to extend the introductory ideas in our Bookmaking and Notebook mini-courses.

Tinkering and Making – Amanda has created a full day workshop based on her highly successful twilight this year, so you'll get a chance to explore and learn even more.

Learning the Most from Running Records – a Twilight series of 2 sessions. Angela has planned a process to help you understand, analyse, interpret and plan from Running Records so they are used to their full potential as a rich tool to inform teaching.

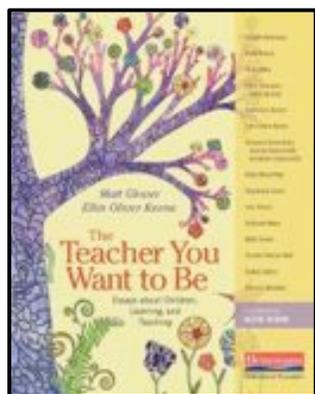
Effective Writing Conferences R-7 – a new Twilight to develop this important part of the Writing Workshop. Another extension to our introductory mini-courses.

We will, of course, continue to offer the popular mini-courses:

Introduction to Bookmaking, Introduction to Writer's Notebooks, Children as Researchers and the **Active Readers Twilight Series**.

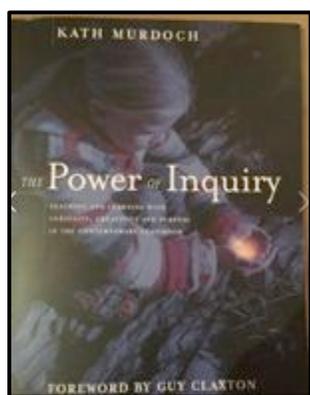
"Perhaps the most pure form of inquiry occurs through play. Play is the vehicle through which children investigate their world, test their theories, explore and create. From the moment they are born, young children are natural inquirers." Kath Murdoch (2015) p. 119

My Favourite Books of 2015



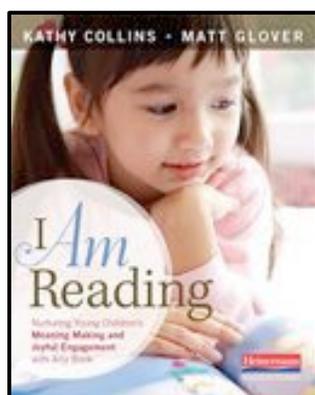
The Teacher You Want to Be – Matt Glover & Ellin Oliver Keene (ed.)

I'm yet to finish this book, but just a look at the contents page and the contributing authors is enough to tell me it will become one of my favourites! Sir Ken Robinson, Alfie Kohn, Katie Wood Ray, Matt Glover, Peter Johnston...their books fill my bookshelves already. It is a collection of essays about children, learning and teaching that came about after a group Study Tour to Reggio Emilia. The thinking, stories and provocations within this book are not limited to early childhood.



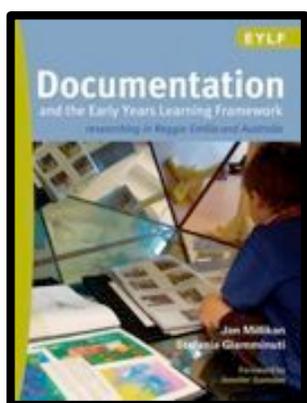
Power of Inquiry – Kath Murdoch

Kath Murdoch is my 'go-to person' for anything inquiry. And she's an Aussie so writes from an understanding of our context and culture of schooling. I felt so inspired reading this book – I kept calling out "YES!" as I read, so it was a good thing I was alone at the time! I think this is essential reading for any educator interested in authentic, meaningful learning and transforming their teaching from 'doing activities' to deep thinking and learning through children's innate curiosity. Kath has written with a good balance of theory and practical strategies to try.



I Am Reading – Matt Glover & Kathy Collins

This is another book that I found myself audibly commenting on (positively) as I read! I use Matt Glover's work to inform our Bookmaking approach and his book about reading does not disappoint. It is written from a competent, strength-based view of the child and explores the literacy present when children 'role-play read' familiar texts. It then continues naming the ways children expertly apply their literacy strategies to unfamiliar texts. I connect with the authors' advocacy for recognising the powerful literacy emergent readers use rather than pushing down isolated academics into prior-to-school and first years of school settings.



Documentation and the Early Years Learning Framework - Researching in Reggio Emilia and Australia – Jan Millikan & Stefania Giamminuti

If you, like me, are a 'student' of Reggio Emilia, you will know the names of these authors. Written for our Australian context, Jan and Stefania write about the complex pedagogy of documentation with great clarity. They dispel some myths and challenge us to go beyond a documentation product to thinking of the documentation process as an attitude we bring to all we do as educators. Although written around the EYLF principles of Belonging, Being, Becoming, this book should not be limited to educators in prior-to-school settings.



The Language of Learning

One of the most powerful, if not THE most important, tools we have as educators is our language.

The words we choose, the tone we use and our non-verbal gestures convey strong messages to children, families and our colleagues. Language has the power to build up – or to take down. The saying “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” may be helpful self-talk to build resilience but the truth is, words CAN hurt. They also reveal our values, beliefs and in the case of an educator, our philosophy about learning and our image of the child.

I could definitely write a book about this topic, as many have done. For this article, I decided to focus on the words we use as educators and how they contribute to the culture of learning we build in our setting.

The first question to ask ourselves is: What kind of learning culture do we want to create and nurture? As Vygotsky (1978, p. 88) says:

“Children grow into the intellectual life around them.”

The following reflections may help you to clarify this for yourself:

- How do you want children to see themselves as learners?
- What do you want children to think and believe about learning?

- What is most important to YOU about your personal learning theories?
- What do you believe makes a strong, competent learner?

Let’s consider an example to illustrate how our words reveal much more than we might have intended:

Imagine the following scene (I’m sure you can!): A class of children and their teacher are in the middle of a Maths lesson. Children are working in small groups, playing games that help them to explore place value and addition. Suddenly, one of the groups explodes with noise, arguing about how one child is playing the game.

Teacher A responds: *“That group, get back to work or you’ll be staying in at lunch!”*

Teacher B: *“When you’re loud like that, it stops the other groups from learning and I find it hard to hear the children I’m trying to listen to.”*

Teacher C: *“This isn’t like you. What’s the problem? What are some ways you could solve it?”*

(adapted from Peter Johnston, 2004, Choice Words)

Each of these responses conveys different beliefs about learning held by the educator.

Teacher A’s response conveys a feeling that learning is work and the children are doing a task, almost a chore. It also reveals a concept of the teacher being ‘boss’ and

the children needing to be controlled.

Teacher B's response speaks more of learning cooperatively and a belief that learning happens in a social context where the rights of others are respected.

While Teacher C's words convey a belief in the competency of children to collaborate and solve their social problems.

Self-Concept

Language (verbal and non-verbal) is representational (of our ideas, feelings, actions and so on) and also works to create realities and identities. This is such an important concept for us to understand as educators. Our words hold the power to create identities as learners for children. When we talk to each other, and whenever we talk to a child, we unconsciously influence the self; concept the other is building. If you are told, "You're so thoughtful" over time you will believe that you ARE a thoughtful person. You will begin to see yourself that way. This is that 'self-fulfilling prophecy' we often talk about. Consider how different it would be to hear "Oh, he's shy that's why he doesn't talk much" or "You're so funny!" or "She's very naughty at school". Over time, these ideas about you infiltrate into how you see yourself and inform your self-concept. When others hear these words it also informs their view of you. It is no surprise that children from as young as 2 or 3 can identify who the 'naughty child' is at childcare or school. I remember very clearly (more than once) being told by a colleague or Principal that I would have in my class because "they're very disruptive and you'll be able to handle it", only to find that once I met the child and we developed a relationship, s/he was not a 'disruptive child' at all. The words of my colleague and Principal had influenced my image of the child before I had even met him/her. Thankfully, I was flexible enough to change this once I had my own experience to draw on!

Concept of Learning

If our words can inform a child's self-concept and the view of him/her held by other children, educators and parents, then our language will also influence the concept of learning that is developed by a learning

community. Guy Claxton encourages us to stop change our language from 'doing work' to 'learning' so that children (and teachers and parents) do not develop a view that learning is a chore. Consider the concept of learning that these words convey:

A teacher approaches children building with blocks...

"What are you doing?" (Learning is doing the task.)

"What are you making?" (Learning is a product.)

"What are you thinking about?" (Learning involves thinking about what you're involved with.)

A teacher shares a child's Writer's Notebook that is very neat, tidy with few words crossed out.

"Look at how Is keeping his Notebook organised and neat." (Learning is neat, tidy and probably linear.)

A different teacher shares a child's Writer's Notebook that has words crossed out and some unfinished pages.

"Do you see all the words that have been crossed out? That shows that ... is thinking like a writer and choosing her words carefully. She's revising as she is writing so must be re-reading as she writes too." (Learning is sometimes messy because it's not linear. The process, strategies and thinking are important, not so much the product produced at this stage.)

Imagine a group conversation...

"Where does the sun rise and set?" (Learning is about having the right answer.)

"Do you think the sun rises and sets in the same or different places? Why? How do you know?" or "What's your theory/ideas about...?" (Learning is personal and involves thinking, theorising, wondering, connecting and sharing ideas.)

Reflect on your language. Do your words bring focus to the product or the process of learning? Do they unconsciously promote a concept that if you're smart learning is easy and you have the right answers? Or a concept that learning is sometimes hard but the effort you put in is important, even if you make mistakes?



Ron Ritchhart (2010) offers a helpful framework for becoming more aware of and intentional with the words we use in our interactions with children. When teachers want to create a healthy learning culture, where children see themselves as strong learners, where they feel safe to take risks and contribute ideas, where they understand that learning isn't getting the task done but about wondering, thinking, connecting and being confused sometimes, they will pay attention to using the language of learning, not work.

Language of Community

WE are a community of learners. Using *we, our, us* communicates the social nature of living and learning. Always using *I* and *you* can convey separateness and even control, like, *"I want you do to this."*

Language of Identity

When we talk to children as writers, readers, mathematicians, scientists, investigators and so on, they will begin to see themselves in these identities. The words communicate that learning is not just about knowing stuff, but about dispositions, actions and thinking authentically.

Language of Personal Agency (vs. Rescuing)

What do you say when a child struggles with something? When they can't do the zip up on their bag, the tower they are constructing keeps toppling over, or the spread;sheet they are creating isn't working.

"Here, let me help you with that," might be from thoughtful intentions and offer a quicker way out of the struggle, but it will not support the child to have a strategy the next time they encounter a struggle.

When we say, *"Try this..."* or *"You need to put a wider base on the tower"* we only rescue children from the struggle

that is essential for learning. We're actually taking away the gift that an authentic and purposeful struggle is to building strong learning dispositions and a sense of achievement.

To communicate a belief in the capacity of the child to be an active problem;solver and the importance of persistence and flexible thinking when learning, we are wise to use words such as:

"I can see you're a bit stuck. What are you going to try next?"

"What could you do about that?"

"What have you tried already?"

"I can see you're not giving up on that. You're persisting and trying different ways to figure it out. You'll get there!"

Language of Noticing and Naming

This language of learning is one I use ALL the time. I'm not sure I always did, but it has definitely become such a part of my teaching repertoire that I'm often unaware that I'm using it. When I'm intentionally modelling and thinking aloud for children I will often use *"I noticed..."* to help make the learning visible. Very soon I don't need to do this so much as children become the very best 'noticers' when they have learnt its importance to learning.

As teachers, we need to pay attention to WHAT we are noticing and naming.

- Do I notice and name only the children who finish a task first, conveying that it is good to rush learning?
- Do I notice and name the 'right answers' more than the approximations and value the thinking involved?
- Do I notice and name the process of learning or the finished products/tasks?

Noticing and naming the learning process, the learning dispositions and the thinking children do will help them learn and use the meta;language of learning. Then they too will have the words to notice and name their learning.

"That's an interesting connection."

“What a fascinating theory!”

“You seem very curious about that.”

“You’ve just made an inference with that thinking.”

“I can hear lots of questioning happening here.”

“Who is thinking a different prediction?”

“What makes you think that?” – this is my personal favourite to nudge children to explain their thinking.

Language of Knowing

Our language can convey ideas and information as fixed and absolute or as evolving, complex and everchanging.

Fixed View of Knowledge: The classic fixed language example is the “Guess What’s in the Teacher’s Head” question. We all fall into the trap of doing this at times. I wonder if this happens because it might have been the predominant questioning form during our own schooling. There might be a few answers to this kind of question, but the teacher keeps searching for exactly the one that is in his/her head. You might as well ask:

“Guess what I had for dinner last night?”

“What’s the answer?”

Changing View of Knowledge:

“What’s another idea?”

“..., do you have a different perspective on this?”

“What’s your theory about...?”

“What’s your opinion about...?”

“One way to think about this is...”

“...could be a helpful strategy here. What other strategies could we use?”

Language of Feedback (vs. Praise)

Everyone likes a bit of praise. It makes us feel good. It’s just that it’s not so helpful in creating the kind of learning culture we’re interested in here. At it’s worst, praise can create a dependency, like any reward system. Children can become dependent upon getting praise from the teacher. They begin to see the value in their learning only when it has been validated by the teacher and not for any intrinsic satisfaction it might bring.

We see this in the early years all the time, don’t we? *“Do you like my painting?”* Really, the thing that matters is that

the child is pleased and satisfied with his/her painting. That s/he knows s/he put effort into it, s/he enjoyed the experience and has a sense of satisfaction from the effort s/he put in.

Praise might sound like:

“Wow! I love your drawing!”

“Good boy for helping her with the bags.”

“I liked your story.”

The Language of Noticing and Naming is far more powerful and meaningful. Praise is short-lived. Feedback can propel learning forward. Noticing and Naming can be connected to feedback for this purpose. It explains what the learner did successfully and can continue to do. But feedback isn’t always about what has gone well. For example:

“I enjoyed reading your story. (Praise, but in this case from the perspective of being the reader.) The lead you crafted hooked me in right from the beginning and I noticed the way you used dialogue between the main characters to keep me interested all the way through.”

The Language of Feedback is specific, informative, true and sincere.

“I can see you tried to spell this word a few different ways and then chose one. That’s a very effective strategy that spellers often use. I do it all the time. Have you used this strategy anywhere else?”

“When I was looking at your graph, something didn’t look quite right, so I looked a bit closer and noticed some of the data wasn’t entered accurately. A helpful habit to get into is to always double check the numbers when you enter data from paper to electronic forms.”



What Languages of Learning are strongest in your teaching?
What Language will you use more intentionally now?