



imagine...

create...

believe...



Welcome to 2013!

It seems a little strange writing that when it is already March! I hope 2013 has begun well for you all – a new school year in the Southern Hemisphere and the middle of one in the North.

The new year has certainly begun in earnest for me. My consulting work is completely booked out for the year and I'm already talking about 2014 with some sites and districts (crazy!). Thank you also to everyone for your overwhelming support of the conference and workshop days. The Playful Learning day is proving incredibly popular – it is onto its fourth repeat and each time is booked out within 2-3 days. The workshops that explore the pedagogy of writing and the Early Childhood Twilights have booked out with waiting lists also.

I have battled with the decision to look for a larger venue and increase the attendance numbers at these sessions, but have decided to keep the numbers capped to 35-45 so that participants have a higher quality experience. Thank you for your patience if you have needed to be on the waiting list for any professional learning experience.

Best wishes

Lisa

Sites & Blogs

Early Childhood Organisation SA

www.echo.asn.au

Alan Wright – writer's notebooks

<http://livinglifetwice-alwrite.blogspot.com.au>

Facebook Pages:

Lisa Burman – Consulting in Pedagogical Change

EChO (Early Childhood Organisation SA)

Listen – Joanne Haynes

Rethinking Childhood (Tim Gill)

Inspired EC



“An involved child is gaining a deep, motivated, intense and long term learning experience.”

*Ferre Laevers
Leuven University, Belgium*

Who is “Pretend Learning”?



Meet Layla. She has just turned five and began school this year – just a few weeks ago, in fact. Layla loves school, just like she loved going to Kindy when she was four. School is different to Kindy though. You can't go outside to play when you want to, for starters. You have to ask the teacher if you can go to the toilet, even if you're really busting. And there are big kids at school. But Layla keeps away from them in the playground at the moment so it's okay.

Layla has learnt a lot about school already. In her very first week – maybe even on the first day – she learnt the most important lesson: *“When you have something to say, you put your hand up.”* Well, that's not exactly true, because one time Layla really wanted to tell her teacher that their puppy made a mess in the house before she came to school that morning and her Dad got mad. But when she put her hand up, her teacher didn't ask her to talk. And that's the next rule: *“Don't talk unless the teacher calls your name.”*

The next thing Layla learnt about class discussions was that you have to wait for the teacher to ask a question, and then put your hand up, but only if your idea is the same one the teacher wants. Soon Layla realised that Brayden and Joe and Lucy always put their hands up and that her teacher almost always asks them what they think. So Layla realised she didn't have to put her hand up, because Brayden and Joe and Lucy will do that and her teacher will be happy.

What is concerning in this story – for all the Laylas and Lewises in our classrooms – is that when you learn that you don't have to put your hand up because the teacher will always ask someone else, you don't get involved in the conversation. It leads to non-participation in class discussions. But more worrying I think, is that it is a just little step to go from *“I don't have to put my hand up”* to *“I don't have to think because I don't have to put my hand up and I won't be called to share my thinking anyway.”*

I have a theory that we have a lot of “pretend learners” in our classrooms. Children like Layla who like school and want to please the teacher. They are compliant - not engaged. This is very dangerous. If our primary goal in education is learning but many children are pretending to be learning, then we need to do something about it.

My favourite quote of the moment (it changes regularly!) comes from David Perkins from the Visible Thinking Project at Harvard:

“Learning is the consequence of thinking.”

If we're not engaging children in thinking, then we're not causing learning to happen. This is a big topic, of course, and beyond the scope of this short article, but adopting some simple strategies during class discussions is one way to stop some of the “pretend learning” that might be happening.

Who is “Pretend Learning”? cont.

For a few years now, I’ve been using random strategies for discussions (or Learning Conversations as some of the schools I work with now call them in an effort to make clear to the children what the talk is for). Rather than using the old “*teacher question – one child answers – another teacher question – another child answers*” pattern of conversation, I provide children with time to think, followed by time to talk to their partner. This strategy is nothing new (“Turn and Talk” or “Think-Pair-Share”). When we get to the sharing time, I tell children I will use a “Lucky Dip” or “Random” strategy for choosing who will share their thinking and that we will not use hands up. I can ask anyone because everyone was involved in thinking and talking about their ideas just then. The partner talk provides a rehearsal for thinking and talking as well as the opportunity to organise thinking and hear different perspectives.

When a child hesitates, I consciously allow thinking time. If the child still hesitates, I might offer a scaffold such as “*Talk to us about what you and your partner were talking about*” or “*Your partner can help you with some ideas.*” Knowing your children well is the key here. You will know who might feel anxious and need further scaffolding and support to participate in a secure environment. Another favourite scaffold I use is, “*Keep thinking about it and we will come back to you. Listen to the other comments now and that will help you with your ideas.*” Not only does this provide the child with more thinking time, it gives him/her a strategy (ie: listen to other’s comments) to formulate their thoughts. Just don’t forget to go back to them!

I discovered Dylan Wiliam’s work last year (a bit late, I know!). His research into strategies (such as “No Hands Up”) that engage children in their classroom experience is helping to transform learning and teaching in many schools in UK and now in Australia. The BBC has made a fascinating documentary called “*The Classroom Experiment*” that follows the story of a few schools in UK who work with Wiliam. Two episodes are easy to find and view on Youtube – I highly recommend them.

I’ve also met a few teachers in Adelaide who have also been experimenting and innovating on the “No Hands Up” strategy. Fiona Takos from Woodville Gardens B-7 and Amanda Bartram from Blair Athol North B-7 Schools are just two of them. I thank them for sharing their experiences and reflections with us



Over the past few years I have wondered about the many disengaged students that we have in Junior Primary classrooms. Teaching a year two class this year I was confronted with many children who rarely participated in our learning and struggled to complete simple tasks without my constant support and encouragement. I knew that if I used the same strategies that I had always used that I would probably get the same results and I wanted to do something different this year.

I believed that in order for me to create independent confident learners I had to change my pedagogy. I had to become a more reflective teacher and began asking myself a lot of why questions such as: Why do we make children put their hands up? Why can I not differentiate learning when I am teaching? Why can I not work with a small group on the floor and set the others a writing task to do? Why do I have to hover around the room checking the children are on task when I could be doing some one to one conferencing? I realized that I was doing a lot more for the children than I should have to and teaching too much as a whole class group. I knew that in order for the children to become the successful writers and readers I wanted them to be I had to work on things such as building stamina, explaining success criteria and introducing working routines in order to release that dependency my children had on me always being there to do the checking. Our 'No Hands Up' policy was one of the new pedagogies my children have experienced this year.

My purpose or intention was to create dialogue during those explicit teaching times and to have less of me talking and more of the students thinking driving the learning. I discussed the intention with the students making sure they had a clear understanding of why it was now suddenly ok to share their thinking without raising their hands. We now have conversations together with an 'all in' policy meaning everybody has opportunity to contribute and engage in the learning. Every student has a voice and an opportunity to be heard.

An interesting group to watch is the children who always have their hands up regardless of the topic of conversation or the curriculum subject. I asked myself are these children skilled in the art of thinking and conversation or is it rather the importance of constantly receiving approval from me when they share their thoughts? Is it that their opinion is going to be less valued if a teacher does not hear it and give an appropriate word of praise? I was amazed at the reaction

of my confident students when they were no longer able to put their hands in the air and make those little noises that say 'I know the answer'. Dealing with their disapproval at having to wait until their name was called so they could get involved and having to deal with the disappointment when they were not asked was very interesting indeed. We had to have many conversations around valuing the opinions of the other students even if they felt their thinking was better and understanding that their thinking is just as valuable even if they do not get an opportunity to share it.

At first you will need to have a conversation together about why the checking word has been used. The children will be able to tell you that they were talking too loudly or they were not taking turns and therefore not listening to others. Eventually just saying POPCORN will be enough for them to instantly self-check, no time is wasted and you can continue on. When I stop writing and turn around in my class now I notice my children are already self checking before I even say the word 'popcorn' they know its coming and the self checking behaviour becomes automatic.

Another strategy to get away from using 'hands up' is to use whiteboards and coloured pens. The students use the whiteboards to record their answers and thinking and then hold up the answers. The boards are then scanned by the teacher and other students. All students have the opportunity to participate using this method and it is a very effective method for assessing work you have been doing. Two hundred years ago teachers used slate and chalk to do the same thing. Even if we are reading a book the children have their whiteboards and if I ask a question like 'what do you think is going to happen next in the story?' they all write their answers on the whiteboards and hold them up and I randomly choose some students to share. Again it's the 'all in' everybody thinking about our learning nobody is allowed to disengage and everybody's thoughts are valued and there is no need for a frenzy of hands up in the air.

In no time my students adapted to the 'no hands' up policy and displayed a more relaxed more confident attitude toward explicit teaching times and sharing times on the carpet. They understood that they had a responsibility to be a part of the learning going on and talking and conversing with each other was just a daily part every lesson for us. I stopped thinking that if I wasn't talking then I wasn't teaching and my students were benefiting and engaging.

I instigated the 'no hands up' strategy and explained that I was trying to change my teaching style and learn a new way of doing things. Naturally, this necessitate me being 'brave' and I would no doubt make mistakes, which was all part of my learning.

I used paddle pop sticks with names on them, which were placed in a cup. Instead of waiting or asking for learners to put their hands up to answer a question, volunteer for a task, express an opinion – I would state the question or task and then select a stick to determine who would answer/talk/get the job. This led to some anxiety, glee and mathematical reasoning about the likelihood of names being drawn out more often than not. At first it was fun, but then some reactions similar to those in the video began to emerge....

Leticia and David reacted much like Emily in the video. Prior to the NHU rule, they had monopolized the answering of questions and always had their hands up. Leticia got quite angry and stated "it's not fair" several times over the first couple of weeks. David became exasperated when other learners did not know the answer and he did. A few of the learners who had previously 'hidden' themselves away became quite anxious and tried responding consistently with "I don't know". I accepted IDK as an answer, but then asked them to find out (various strategies were accepted for this, including asking a friend). As everyone realized that the system was not going to go away, and that they all had equal chance of being chosen each time, there were fewer negative reactions and IDKs and, in my observations, more engagement with the question/topic.

I learned two big things about my own practice. One was that, whilst I rarely ask for hands up, I do ask a question/make a statement and then wait expectantly for hands up. Using this strategy I was more likely to ask/state and then quietly wait (without expectation) before selecting a stick from the cup. In fact, me reaching for the stick jar was a good visual prompt for everyone to prepare a response.

Secondly, I learned that I really did ignore some learners a lot more than others. This strategy engaged me in learner responses as much as it did them. I became keen to see who would be chosen, and what they would say. Because everyone had a response prepared and there was some disappointment in not being chosen, I often gave opportunities to 'turn and talk' and share their thinking with a friend. For this reason, I have decided to begin using mini whiteboards as a group time strategy, so that all thinking is recorded and shared more often.

As I begin a new school year, with an almost all-new group of learners, I will be continuing with the NHU strategy. I believe it encourages high levels of engagement and involvement. It provides opportunities for practicing thinking and responding, and then sharing thinking in a public forum. Even four weeks of using this made me a better group leader and more reflective of my questioning and 'thinking out loud' techniques. We will also be using the 'sticks' in small group and partner work, so that learners manage and use the strategy themselves, and face the challenges of working together in roles that may not be their first choice.

Note from Lisa:

I make sure that the kinds of questions I ask during this time are open-ended and not "guess what's in the teacher's head" questions that fish for one right answer. I'm interested in children's ideas, in their thinking, and interested in what they talked about with their partner. There are no 'wrong' answers in these conversations. Be consistent with this approach and it has the power to transform your learning conversations – before long your children will know that there is no need for 'opt outs' because everyone's ideas are valued and given air time.