Blog Post: Looking for Learning in ALL the Right Places

By Orit Kent
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Is learning visible? What evidence can we see of learning in our classrooms? And what can we as teachers do to fine-tune our capacities to observe our students’ learning in its many complex facets?

For Steve Seidel, who spoke to an audience of over 100 teachers at the Mandel Center’s 4th annual teacher forum recently, these questions are at the heart of a teacher’s work. The key is to look closely with other teachers at the materials our students create and really wonder about and appreciate their meaning and significance. It is through this process, Seidel believes, that we can get to the heart of our students’ learning, and uncover core questions and insights about our own teaching.

Seidel took the entire group through his protocol, a guided inquiry into student learning, by sharing a painting created by a student. “What do you see?” Seidel asked the crowd. No simple answers followed in the forty-five minute analysis of the work that ensued. Seidel told the group that any piece of student work has “lots of interpretations and if you don’t slow down that process, your mind just tends to settle…but [the work is] full of possibilities.” These “possibilities” and evidence of learning may not always be what the teacher intends, but finding the “sweet spot” between what teachers intend for students to learn and what students actually do learn is a core aspect of teaching.

Nitzan Singer, a kindergarten teacher at MetroWest Jewish Day School in Framingham, MA, observed that “assessment, or looking at student work, should be a positive part of the learning process, not tedious or irrelevant. If it is feeling like the latter, then something needs to be tweaked. … Listening in as my group observed the student work I had brought in was thought-provoking and interesting. I’d looked at the piece I brought in a handful of times before the workshop and was amazed that the group was able to pull out even more. They helped me realize how intentional the kindergarten student had been about so many aspects to his short story.”

While public discussions of education often focus on standardized measures, Seidel is promoting a different route to assessing and understanding our students’ learning and ultimately our own teaching. For him, the capacity to see learning is linked to our capacity to wonder about the works our students create. “The combination of awe and doubt is a particularly potent mixture,” Seidel notes. “It has a way of opening us up to learning. … We redouble our efforts…wondering takes time, attention, and effort. It is not unlike prayer.” (Seidel, “Wondering to Be Done,” p. 37)

If you’re a teacher, how is student work visible in your classroom? What strategies do you
use to make learning more visible to you, and to students? Let us know in the comments, below.