Reflections from the Feb.11, 2009 SmartLearning Round…

Background

This one-day SmartLearning Round was set in Tammy Kay's grade four classroom in Penticton B.C. Many of the participants joining the learning round had attended a fall learning round, also set in Tammy's classroom. They were very excited about seeing the learners again. And the learners were visibly excited to see them. Smiles and coy glances reflected a joyful tension in the room.

Through regular meetings since the fall learning round, the intermediate participants had had opportunities to share their SmartLearning implementation experiences. They were all feeling relatively confident and comfortable with the connecting and processing phases of the SmartLearning process. For this learning round they wanted to see the transforming phase in a learning sequence, the part where the teacher guides the learners to demonstrate their understanding.

Tammy had been inspired by Jill Doyle's visual thinking workshop at the Nov.2-3, 2008 *Motivating Minds Conference*. She knew her particular learners would benefit greatly from visual thinking experiences set in content areas. She set about to use her understandings to plan a learning sequence for the February learning round. To maximize the opportunities for skill development, Tammy integrated Social Studies concepts with outcomes in Language Arts, Fine Arts and Planning. She chose content concepts that can often be abstract and difficult for early intermediate students to grasp: how three layers of government affect our lives. Tammy planned the learning sequence as distinct cycles of SmartLearning to be implemented over five – seven blocks of time, leading up to the February learning round. Scott Edwards worked closely with her to plan the learning round components.

Tammy worked to develop the concepts to the point where the students would begin to transform their understandings into visual models and written expression, during the learning round. Tammy co-taught the learning round with Scott Edwards and Susan Close. Janice Clary did all of the foot work to plan, organize and orchestrate the professional interaction.

Following the learning round participants were invited to reflect:

1. **What did you notice about the effects of the learning round on you?**

2. **What did you notice about the effects of the SmartLearning approach on student learning?**

- This class makes me feel confident that I have the tools to 'do' SmartLearning on my own. I feel support from all of the others that are leading or involved in any way. I feel satisfied that the work I am doing in my classroom is important. Although I know I can improve and develop in some areas, I am successful and my kids are progressing very well. I noticed that students seem to feel relaxed and confident with their ideas in an atmosphere where they feel appreciated. There was a sense of community in the room. They were able to grasp new concepts through work with the vault of tools that visibly varied and balanced right and left brain activity. They seemed to understand why they were doing what they were doing. Active purpose was evident. The process of SmartLearning presses students to transfer learning to their own lives.

- (The Learning Round)...made me realize that you can reach every student as long as the lesson is structured properly, and that differentiated teaching is within my grasp. I am motivated to use a lot more goal setting, and to spend quality time to build skills so students can begin to internalize them. The students were confident expressing their ideas and comfortable sharing them. The understanding of concepts is far greater when students express their ideas visually through model making, and then in writing. Their group work was so cohesive, and they related so well to each other.

- SmartLearning seems possible. I think I could do it, or at least attempt to try. The step by step in real time helps me see time differently, and the time it really takes to go through the process.

- The 'writes' that came out of today's learning round are proof that SmartLearning can reach and challenge all learners. This is even more powerful now that we know the makeup of the class and how many challenges the students face. I really liked having Tammy explain the make-up of the class and the range of skill levels. I would not have believed learning like this was possible with learners with such a range of needs. Every student is given an opportunity to show what they know, and to achieve and feel good about their learning. When students feel good about their work, they become more confident and become more willing to take risks.

- Thank you for an incredible day. My Dad always says, "I'm from Missouri" which means "I need to see it, and experience it, to believe it." I'm like that too, and now I believe in SmartLearning. Academically, reading about SmartLearning got me interested but seeing the teacher and her students engaged in the process made me believe. The effect on the learners that I witnessed was both impressive and inspiring. The level of confidence and awareness of their learning shows them becoming capable and passionate thinkers and learners. That leads to interesting and involved citizens with opinions that can SAVE THE WORLD! Or at least help!

- I am inspired! So many things came together for me this time, and this is my third learning round experience. In my master's programme I just finished analyzing a lesson I taught using twelve brain-mind principles. I used a SmartLearning sequence. Thank you for providing me with such a clear process. Thank you to the team for preparing this learning round.

- I noticed that most of the students were able to exceed expectations on the oral language rubric. Thank you to Ann Nottingham for developing the rubric for the outcomes in the curriculum. Students were engaged and rarely off task. Their growth from the fall was obvious and apparent. I am so glad that I got to see them in the fall and then again in February. The students showed pride in their learning.

- There is such powerful learning happening in Mrs. Kay's grade classroom. One area that I really noticed was the goal setting that each student did. The goals they pick were relevant to the task at hand and really furthered their learning. One particular boy demonstrated this by making a goal to pull his weight in the group. He followed through with his goal which helped further his group's work. I could see his real sense of accomplishment for completing his goal of helping the group. Some students were invited to stand and share what they had written so far, a little while into the individual writing. This acknowledged the individual writer and gave each one an opportunity to hear what was written while giving the rest of the class opportunities to hear different ways of expressing ideas. It also helped affirm each writer and gave each one confidence to continue working to make the words say what they wanted them to say. Having students stand to speak got them moving, and let any restlessness drift away. The teachers continually restated the goals as students worked. This coaching kept the students on track; everyone knew what they were doing. Everyone was focused and their pens and pencils were continually moving. What an inspiring sight!

- This was an authentic experience with a balance of philosophical and practical ideas. There were opportunities for purposeful reflection and debriefing. The classroom interaction provided a realistic look at how it can work. Today's demonstration showed us the transforming piece and it was exactly what I needed. I like seeing the full process, of many cycles of SmartLearning and the tools they used to develop the skills, linked together with the student work along the way. We had an opportunity to see the students' entire work in their duo tangs ... not one sample in isolation. That really helped.

- The learning round improved my understanding in a big way. I had heard a lot about SmartLearning, and had seen the DVDs, but I needed to see it. This experience was a missing piece for me. I noticed more production, far greater understanding with A/B partner-talk. I have been phasing in new aspects of SmartLearning all the time, and today's experience made a significant difference for me. I noticed a faster pace and a much greater depth of understanding reflected in the writing.

- This learning round made me realize that you can reach every student as long as the lesson is structured properly and that differentiated teaching is within my grasp. I am motivated to use a lot more goal-setting and to spend quality time to build skills so that students can begin to internalize them. The students in this class are confident with their ideas and confident sharing them. The depth of the concepts they are learning is much greater because they are visually shaping their ideas in models to deepen their images and understanding, before writing. Their group work was so cohesive and they related so well to each other.

- It was so great to see another teacher using SmartLearning. I could compare strategies and take away new ideas and information to use when I get to teach! I found the whole process very helpful. Being able to just observe a class in progress with a research lens to guide my watching, and then reflect with other teachers helped me to see that SmartLearning takes learning to a whole different deeper level. I noticed that all students can participate at their own level and they all are able to progress at their own pace. Having the tasks chunked was so important for the students because they had time to visualize and think about their writing before they were invited to write. This is so important for organization. Students really got much deeper meaning and more powerful expression through the SmartLearning process. I think this is because of the focus on metacognition -- the thinking about their own thinking, their personal goals, and their own personal reflections.

- I'm a completely visual learner and until I see something in process, I do not fully grasp the concept. It was great to talk about the positive results and the brain research underpinnings that support SmartLearning, but until I saw both the teachers and students interacting in the full process, it wasn't real for me. Furthermore, both times that I have participated in learning rounds have given me strategies and tools that I have taken into my own classroom immediately. I too have an extremely needy class and the results in just the beginning are enormous. Students who never spoke orally before, and were in tears in the beginning, now thrive in their new ways of thinking. I must admit, I thought that it would not be impossible for the students to do the high inference task that the teachers planned. I could clearly see the steps, and the cycles of SmartLearning that the teacher had taken the students through. Once again, I am proven wrong. Once again, through these rounds and in my own teaching I have seen the reason to do SmartLearning. Furthermore, it has enhanced my responsibility as a teacher to my students to make their learning much more valuable and significant. It's hard work and every bit is worth it! Thanks to the team for all of their hard work to prepare this learning round.

- This really makes me think about how I can improve my teaching practice and how to touch all of the learners in my class. I realize the importance of balancing the brain activity, and that I need to incorporate more balancing into my every day lesson planning. I realize every classroom is different and unique and how important differentiated learning really is. I see learners in a whole new light. Students are engaged enjoying what they are doing, thinking about new things, and using new tools that will help them later in life. They are on a life long journey that will be valuable for the rest of their lives.

A Leaders' Guide for a Smart Learning Round has been developed to support the learning round implementation model. Each stage of the process is carefully detailed in the guide.

A Leader's Guide for a SmartLearning Round

Part one: Connecting to the Learning

Welcome

- Setting the context for the learning round, sharing and refining goals
- First words from the teacher(s) co-teaching the round: establishing the thinking behind the plan
- Preparing for the classroom interactions: setting tasks for participants, establishing research lenses; reviewing personal goals set by participants – in light of new information

☐ **First words... from the teacher**.
The teacher volunteering to host the learning round is introduced, and (s) he explains details about the class:

- General overview of the students...
- Experiences the students have had with the *SmartLearning* process and with the *SmartThinking* tools...
- Social interaction in the class: experiences students have had with A/B structured-talk, collaborative-talk, class-talk

☐ **The teacher and the co-teaching facilitator** will outline the planning done in preparation for the learning round, explaining:

- Assessment information guiding the planning
- Concept/s being developed through the plan and skills chosen to focus the teaching
- Resource/s being used
- The *task* and the thinking behind the teaching plan for today's work with the *SmartLearning* process
- Specific ways the teacher(s) plan to use the *SmartThinking* tools chosen for the sequence.

  Note: Once the learning round cycles are in progress, the sequences are co-planned with participants and some of the participants co-teach parts of the sequence.

☐ **Research lenses are discussed*** and participants choose a lens of interest to apply to the learning in the classroom. They are invited to gather observations using a T-Square format with an attribute on one side and observations on the other.

*The first research lens we use reflects the Principles of Learning found in every B.C. curriculum document.

☐ **Before heading into the classroom, participants revisit their initial goal(s)** and finalize personal goals in light of the planning discussion.

☐ **Details of the work in the classroom are discussed**. Participants are invited to do the following during the learning round:

- Engage with the same work as the learners -- participating with a colleague in A/B partners -- observing the learning behaviours of selected students from a distance. Often participants focus on vulnerable learners.
- Apply a research lens to the work gathering information in a T-Square - with the research lens on one side and the observations on the other
- Notice their own learning as they move through the process
- Decide what they will share about their own learning, and the learning they observed during the learning round.

Part two: Processing in the classroom

Welcoming and introducing everyone to the learning round

☐ **First words... from the teacher**
The teacher of the class side-by-side with the co-teacher sets up the learning round, by introducing everyone. (S) he explains the goals, the work the visitors will do, and outlines the steps in the plan for the learners.

> The steps in the process, the *end-task*, and the first reporting-out frame are on the board, or on chart papers.

☐ **Learning *in action* in the classroom**
- Everyone in the room works through the *SmartLearning* sequence.
- At the end of the session, the teacher invites the students and participants to **zip** the learning round. Starting at one side of the room students share what they noticed about their learning in a **whip around.** Then starting at one end of the participants, each person offers his or her observations, closing the zipper on the learning round.

☐ **Words... from the teacher.** The teacher offers his or her thoughts on the session, to bring closure to the classroom experience.

SMART
BETTER TOOLS. BETTER LEARNING.
LEARNING

Part three: analysis and next steps for planning

☐ **First words... from the teacher**

☐ **Participants analyze the learning.** Details of the participant work in the classroom are discussed. Participants are invited to:

  • **Mine for Gold** in small groups of 3 or 4 - talking through the information they gathered during the classroom interaction using, **What's important? Why is that important? (3X), NUGGET**
  • Teams are re-grouped to summarize using, **What's Important and Why?**

☐ **Participants assess the learning** using performance scales/continua/criteria established for the learning... and begin planning for the next session of the learning round answering, *"What do the learners need next and why?"*

☐ **The co-teaching facilitator and teacher review what they did and why** in the learning round, and lead a discussion about the nuances of particular *SmartThinking* tools they used: getting started with a particular tool, going deeper with the tool, using the tool in different curricular areas, variations of the tool, and ways to link the tools for different purposes...

☐ **Planning and setting goals for implementation.** The participants explore how to get started or to go deeper with the process - in a range of grade levels, in different content areas, and with learners from a diverse backgrounds and needs. Each person then sets personal implementation goals.

Part four: reflecting on the learning

☐ **Everyone reflects on the effects of the SmartLearning round** as a professional learning process, and thanks the teacher and the school for hosting the round.

☐ **Last words... from the teacher**

Principles of Effective Learning... one research lens on SmartLearning

Three Core Concepts for Learning and Instruction

1. New learning is strongly influenced by prior knowledge and concepts.

2. Learning for understanding requires a solid core of content structured by major concepts and ideas in the field or discipline.

3. Students can be taught the skills required for effective learning. When these cognitive skills are taught explicitly, learned, and put into practice they foster improved performance in schoolwork and in the tasks of lifelong learning.

McClaren, 2001

Nine Principles for Effective Learning Environments

- Academic Rigor in a Thinking Curriculum
- Accountable Talk
- Clear Expectations
- Fair and Credible Evaluations
- Learning as Apprenticeship
- Organizing for Effort
- Recognition of Accomplishment
- Socializing Intelligence
- Self-management of Learning

Ref:
[http://www.instituteforlearning.org.pol3.html]

Resnick, 2001. The Institute for Learning

Effective Learning ...
What are we looking for?

- deepened knowledge
- higher order skills and strategies
- positive emotions, excitement, enthusiasm
- enhanced sense of self and personal competence
- more sense of connection with others
- an expanding tool-kit of learning strategies

- greater commitment to learning
- engaging with others in learning
- making connections between learning, personal experience and the world outside the school
- reflecting about one's own learning and learning strategies
- setting further learning goals

Principles of Learning

❑ **Active Learning**
- students engage in explicit open-ended tasks that invite complex, higher-order thinking
- students engage with learning strategies to develop their understandings
- students engage in structured assessment, reflection and feedback
- students set goals in light of new understanding(s)

❑ **Collaborative Learning**
- new understandings are developed through structured partner and small group work
- students reflect and set goals in relation to criteria set for partner or group work

❑ **Learner Responsibility**
- students are involved in the development of criteria, find evidence of meeting criteria in their work, and set goals in light of new understandings
- students know the goals, know where they stand in relation to the goals, and they learn how to close the gap

❑ **Learning about Learning**
- Students examine and reflect upon the strategies or learning processes they are using, and how these 'tools' impact their learning

Adapted from Watkins et al. (1996) *Effective Learning*. School Improvement Network: Research Matters, 5:1-8; Black and Wiliam, 1998; B.C. Ministry of Education IRP Curriculum Guides, 2006-9.