

Making Learning Visible: Redefining Learning Groups in School

by Melissa Rivard and Mara Krechevsky

The Project Zero-Wickliffe Collaboration

When we first walked into Wickliffe Progressive Community School in the spring of 2006, we saw large black and white photographs of teachers and other staff with their personal mission statements posted next to them. On one wall, fifth grade teacher Mark Carter wrote, "I chose to teach [at Wickliffe] because of my belief that our school community can guide students to be thoughtful citizens, caring and compassionate people, good stewards of the environment, and life long learners." On another wall, first and second grade teacher Brenda Boyd wrote, "As a progressive educator, I believe that as children are taught, so they learn to live. Children who are taught that their ideas are important, learn that they are important."

The hallways provided a vivid sense of the learning taking place in the classrooms – from a study of African art forms to the results of a science experiment on melting. Original artwork from individuals and groups of students lined the hallways, conveying a sense of the individual in the community. On one wall, photographs of pairs of cross-grade buddies were posted alongside self-portraits and interviews of "buddies by buddies." (See Figure 1) Encountering this richness, we felt an immediate affinity with the school.

At the time, the Making Learning Visible (MLV) project was in its 9th year. The purpose of the project was to investigate the power of the group to support children's and adults' learning.

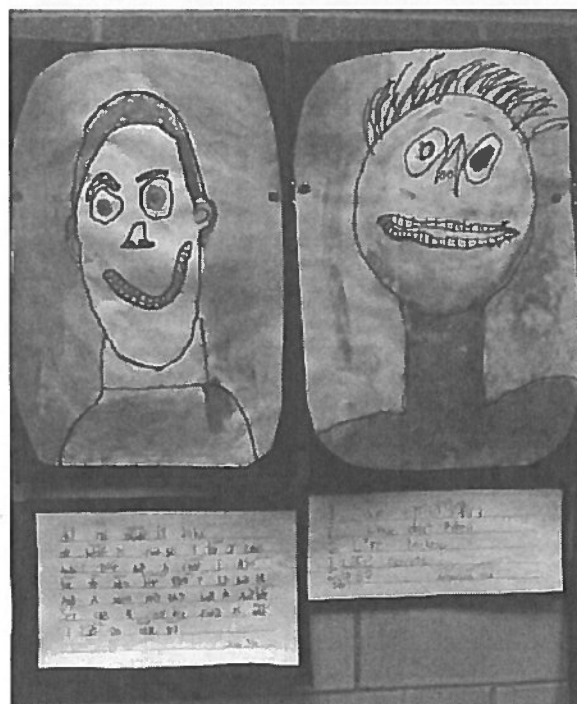


Figure 1. Self-portraits and interviews of "Buddies by Buddies"

MLV began as a collaboration between researchers at Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and educators from the Municipal Preschools and Infant-Toddler Centers in Reggio Emilia, Italy. For the previous five years, we had worked with teams of preK-12 teachers from a variety of public schools in Massachusetts, but never with an entire staff. When Wickliffe Principal Fred Burton invited us to work with an entire elementary school, we jumped at the chance.

Wickliffe had a number of features that boded well for our collaboration:

1. The school's Ten Principles of Progressive Education that guided the teachers' approach to teaching and learning (see Appendix).
2. Parents and long-term staff who had chosen the school because of its approach to education.
3. A strong sense of community among family, school, and local institutions.
4. Time set aside for staff to talk with each other about student work.
5. A deep commitment to the arts as an important form of expression and communication.
6. Administrative support, including preserving a space for reflective practice amid competing state and district mandates.

Of course, like all schools, Wickliffe also had areas for growth. While teachers appreciated and respected each other's ideas, critique was often missing. The conversations we sat in on, while rich and inspiring, sometimes lacked a focus or structure for moving forward. And the abundance of student work on the walls, while compelling, occasionally led to visual saturation.

The collaboration extended from 2005 through 2011 (see Table 1). During the first year, we met with an inquiry group of 16 teachers who had expressed interest in supporting learning in groups by collecting and examining documentation of children's learning. In the second and third years, Fred involved the whole school in the inquiry process. He asked teachers and parents to form Wickliffe Inquiry Groups (WIGs) to explore questions related to making individual and group learning more meaningful. Each year culminated in a school-wide MLV Exhibition open to the public.

2005 - 2006 <i>Initial Inquiry Group</i>	2006 - 2007 <i>Exploration (School-wide)</i>	2007 - 2008 <i>Skill-building (School-wide)</i>	2008 - 2009 <i>Consolidation</i>	2009 - 2011 <i>Dissemination</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Created documentation panels to display at MLV Institute 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formed WIGs • Biweekly phone conferences • Two to three site visits a year • First spring exhibition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phone conferences and site visits continue • Second spring exhibition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership transition to Chris Collaros • Monthly phone conferences with PZ • Participation in PZ Institute 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two-year grant to write a book and create a DVD • Ongoing participation in PZ Institute

Table 1. Ohio Visible Learning Timeline

Throughout our work at Wickliffe, two ideas informed everything we did: 1) the power of groups – particularly small groups – for supporting teaching and learning; and 2) documenting children's and adults' learning as a way to shape, deepen, and extend learning.

The Power of Groups

Globalization and the new economy demand the ability to learn and function in increasingly diverse groups. Yet in many schools in the United States, the focus is almost always on promoting individual performance and achievement, especially when it comes time for assessment.

MLV is an attempt to provoke educators' thinking about and practice of documenting and supporting learning in groups. Learning in groups is central to how individual learning is constructed. Not only can group learning expand individuals' understanding of content, it also helps individuals develop critical capacities for participating in a democratic society. In a group, individuals learn to entertain multiple perspectives, negotiate meaning and ideas, develop and share opinions, and manage disagreement and conflict.

We define a learning group as *a collection of persons who are emotionally, intellectually, and aesthetically engaged in solving problems, creating products, and making meaning in which each person learns autonomously and through the ways of learning of others* (Project Zero and Reggio Children, 2001). This definition differs from traditional definitions in at least four ways:

- The members of the learning group include adults as well as children.
- Learning groups address the emotional and aesthetic as well as the intellectual dimensions of learning.
- Learning groups create as well as transmit knowledge.
- Documenting children's learning shapes and extends what and how the group learns.

We will now discuss each feature in turn with illustrations from the Ohio Visible Learning (OVL) Project – as the MLV work at Wickliffe came to be known.

The Members of the Learning Group Include Adults as Well as Children

Most of the time when we think of a learning group in school, we see the children as learners and the adults as teachers. Yet the adults – teachers, parents, administrators, and community members – should also be considered learners, though the focus of their learning may be different. Schools should be places of inquiry for all participants. Through careful observation and documentation of children's learning, teachers develop new ideas about teaching and learning. Parents and administrators can also participate in this process.

In the OVL Project, teachers and parents formed Wickliffe Inquiry Groups based on shared interests articulated as a question, such as, "How can we use questioning to deepen social and academic learning in the classroom?" or "How do we document positive learning in all settings for children with special needs?"

The process of choosing a WIG question led to greater clarity about what the adults hoped to learn. Criteria for identifying a question included:

- Directly connects to supporting student learning.
- Of interest to you and others in the field.
- Connects to the school's mission (Wickliffe's Ten Principles of Progressive Education).

- Manageable size.
- Accessible to students (if teachers chose to involve them in the inquiry).
- Phrased in a succinct and engaging way.

The WIGs had two primary purposes: 1) To inform daily practice in ways that connected to one or more of the Ten Principles; and 2) To make students' and adults' learning public through notes, staff meetings, documentation posted in or outside the classroom, and the spring exhibitions of learning. This visibility led teachers to be more intentional when designing learning experiences for students and identifying next steps. WIGs met for 1¼ hours twice a month. Groups ranged in size from three to nine members. At each meeting, one or more members brought documentation that showed children's thinking. Each group followed a similar agenda (see Figure 2).

WIG Meeting Agenda

- I. Review meeting goal, agenda, group norms, and notes from last meeting
- II. Silent viewing of documentation related to a question
- III. Discuss documentation using a simple thinking routine (see www.pz.harvard.edu/vt) or protocol (see www.pz.harvard.edu/mlv)
- IV. Identify who will bring documentation to the next meeting
- V. Brief debrief of how the meeting went
- VI. One-minute reflection (written): What is your main take-away? What is your main unanswered question? (Angelo & Cross, 1993)

Figure 2. WIG Meeting Structure

Fred embraced the role of learner by interviewing students, teachers, and parents to determine what was learned at the school's biweekly Town Meeting and sharing his findings at the spring exhibition. He also changed the way he evaluated teachers (see Chapter 11 for an example of the current Wickliffe principal's approach to evaluation). For example, Fred documented a teacher's conversations with a small group of students and used the documentation to connect the follow-up discussion to student learning.

Wickliffe parents also began to see themselves as learners. During each visit to the school, we presented to the parents. After the first two visits, teachers also shared their work with parents to demonstrate the impact of MLV ideas on student learning. In response, one parent reflected, "I am impressed that the group learning seems to encourage kids to bring up many different points of view, solutions, etc. I seem to remember when I was in school that 'right' answers were encouraged and not so much else." Another wrote:

My thoughts are that the "individual" is ultimately a fallacy. We cannot live as isolated entities. As was said tonight by one parent – "even the individual working alone is informed by the group." Emphasis on the individual as a "learner" is a suppression of the reality that we exist in groups – ask or observe any teenager. The movement and direction of the group is incredibly vital and important. Acknowledgement of "the group" allows that reality to breathe, develop, and grow...

Indeed, the Parent WIG's guiding question ("How can we apply what we are learning about MLV and documentation more fully at home?") came out of one of these PTO meetings. Parent WIG members also transformed public forums, such as the information night for new families, by facilitating small group conversations grounded in the documentation of children's learning. As we will see in Chapter 9, teachers began to invite parents into the classroom at key points *during* a unit or project in order to involve them more deeply in the learning process.

Over time, Wickliffe teachers began to include more of their own reflections – both observations of children and reflections on those observations – in the documentation in and outside the classroom. Molly Hinkle added her own thoughts alongside her students' reflections about the role of listening in learning in a speech bubble posted on the wall:

I'm learning two things right now. First, I learn a lot more about my students and their thinking if I'm really focused and listening. Sometimes I try to do too many things at once and I miss out on the learning that could take place. Second, I'm learning that many of my students think about listening when it has to do with [following] directions. I think there's a lot more to it than that. Now I know what to work on with the class where listening is concerned...And I wouldn't know that if I hadn't listened (Krechevsky, Rivard, and Burton, 2010, p. 66).

Teachers posted their own responses to selected assignments alongside the children's responses. Parents were also invited into the learning conversation. For example, fourth grade teacher Tamar Sorin put up the following question in her classroom: "How can I take responsibility for my own learning and what does it look like when I'm doing that?" (See Figure 3) Student responses ranged from "check your own work," "ask questions," and "make predictions," to "explore subjects you find interesting" and "try new experiences." Tamar also set up a Parent Graffiti Board by the door to her classroom with the question, "What kind of learner do you want your child to be?" Parent responses included "humble," "confident," "independent and excited," and "any kind!"

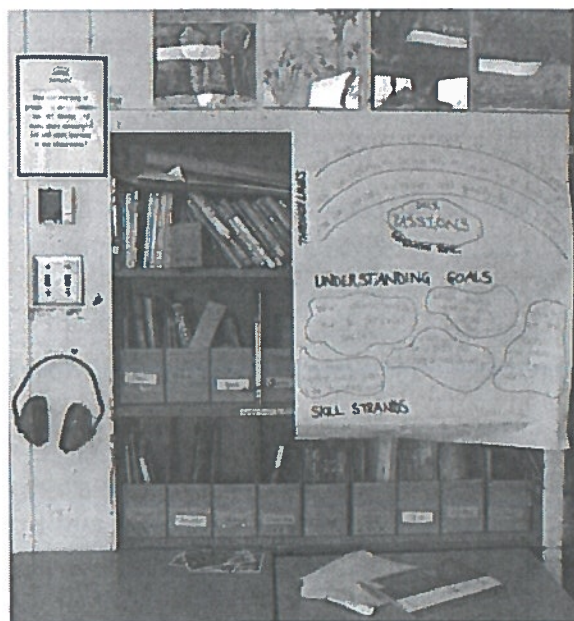


Figure 3. Tamar Sorin's classroom goals

Learning Groups Address the Emotional and Aesthetic as Well as Intellectual Dimensions of Learning

Many approaches to group learning focus on the attainment of knowledge as a goal; references to the emotional and aesthetic dimensions of learning are rare. However, we believe learning groups should engage the emotional and aesthetic as well as intellectual dimensions of learning.

A critical component of learning groups is the presence of a shared passion that brings individuals together and motivates learning. Designing learning experiences that intentionally address the aesthetic qualities of the learning process and product can make the ordinary extraordinary.

Photographs are particularly effective for capturing the emotional aspects of learning. The "Joy of Learning" WIG investigated moments of engagement and joy in the everyday life of the classroom. Sarah Giles, then a student teacher working in a first and second grade classroom, observed and documented when the students seemed particularly engaged. Moments that seemed especially compelling happened when Patty helped children research their own interests, whether closely connected to the curriculum or not. Sarah also noted that children seemed especially engaged when working in pairs or small groups. She also noticed that Patty, the classroom teacher, was not always aware of when these moments of engagement occurred.

Attending to the aesthetic dimension of learning gives teachers a powerful tool for creating more robust learning environments. The aesthetic dimension encompasses three components: the quality of the materials and the set-up of the space, the nature of the learning process, and the nature of those ideas that draw learners into inquiry. The aesthetic dimension involves consideration of what will stimulate the learners' curiosity and captivate their imaginations. Teachers seek materials or phenomena that will generate unexpected transformations or aesthetic effects. As one teacher commented, "Now as I plan for new units of study, I spend more time including the children in the beginning to find just the right burning question to light their fire."

The aesthetic dimension also involves motivating learners to create work of the highest quality. At Wickliffe, classrooms had always been filled with artifacts that inspired reflections on the relationship between form and function and an appreciation of beauty. Now teachers began to make the connection to learning more explicit. The Related Arts WIG in particular became more intentional about framing questions and preserving group memories from week to week. They developed an understanding "throughline" about how American Jazz influences the arts to bring focus to the different experiences during the school's Off-Campus Arts Week.

Learning Groups Create as Well as Transmit Knowledge

The goal of many group learning approaches is to expand individual achievement. Working in a group is seen as another way to help individual students perform even better. However learning in groups can also lead to creating collective knowledge that is larger than what any one person knows. Group learning can increase the capacity of the group itself to solve problems or make products that no individual alone could accomplish. As with the scholarly disciplines, over time, schools and classrooms that nurture group learning generate and exhibit collective as well as individual knowledge.

In the past, Wickliffe teachers regularly paused during classroom activities or lessons in order to ask children to identify the underlying purposes of what they were doing. MLV encouraged teachers to make the larger meaning of their students' studies even more public. As noted earlier, every exhibit in the spring exhibition was linked to one or more of the school's Ten Principles of Progressive Education. Hallway documentation began to include more of an emphasis on building community knowledge. Fifth-grade teacher Elizabeth Glover posted students' thoughts about whether or not their class should study the rain forest in a panel next to her classroom. A fifth

grade student noted his class had claimed they learned how to write checks on their documentation panel, but had not provided evidence to back up their claim. He commented, “Fourth-graders should say ‘next year, I know how to write checks.’ I learned it from your display.”

Maureen Reedy posted the following questions about a unit on ecosystems in the hall outside her fifth grade classroom (Krechevsky, Rivard, and Burton, 2010, p. 68):

1. What is important *for others* to know about what we have learned about our ecosystem?
2. How can we share what we learned about our ecosystem with others?
3. How does your model *help others* deepen their understanding of the subject?

The questions reveal a subtle, yet important, shift in perspective. In the past, Maureen might have posed these questions to students before they shared the products of their learning at the end of a study. Now she wanted students to consider what others could learn *during* the learning process. This shift also supported individual learning by asking children to consider their learning from another perspective.

The “ReQuestors” WIG pooled what they had learned about asking questions that encouraged students to think more deeply and created posters and a “condensed play armband” – like what quarterbacks wear – as a handy scaffold. They made these items available to other colleagues.

The Parent WIG created a “Refrigerator Reminder” about how to support children’s learning at home to distribute at Exhibition Night and other school functions (see Chapter 11).

Documenting Children’s Learning Processes Shapes and Informs the Learning of How the Group Learns

In virtually all American classrooms, even those engaged in group activities, the primary mode of assessment is still testing and evaluation. The teacher’s role as an observer or documenter of student thinking and learning is largely absent. Documentation provides a way to make learning visible so that members of the group are able to learn through the ways others learn.

We define documentation as *the practice of observing, recording, interpreting, and sharing through a variety of media the processes and products of learning in order to deepen and extend learning*. Documentation changes a teachers’ understanding of a group and where to guide it next. Through documentation, children and adults have the opportunity to revisit – individually and collectively – the work and activities they have planned and carried out. Teachers encourage children to share and compare their individual work; even self-reflection is carried out in the presence of peers.

Jill Hughes, Wickliffe’s K-2 Intervention Specialist, wanted her students (many whom struggle with social skills) to become good group learners. Jill suggested to her class that one way to do this was

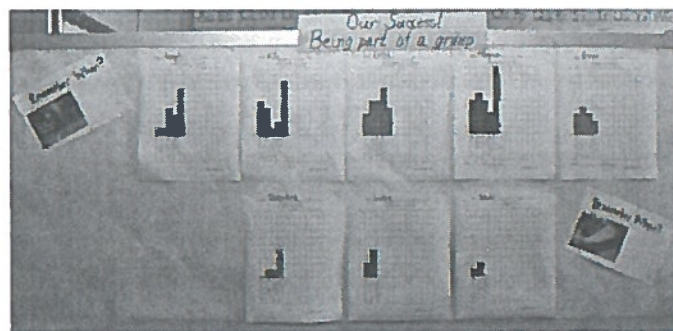


Figure 4. Participants Bar Charts

to keep track of how often students participated in a group conversation. One student suggested using colors to represent each person in the group. Jill chose one group activity a week and created a bar graph to document the number of times each student participated (see Figure 4).

Jill labeled each bar with the date and name of the activity so students could see how often and when they participated and reflect on what made the difference. Every week, Jill had a “thinking back” conversation with each child to fill in the bar graph and talk about what factors might have contributed to the student’s level of participation. One boy realized he was more motivated to contribute to a group when he played a leadership role so he and Jill role-played what it takes to be a good leader. Another student who rarely spoke realized she participated more when she felt like others cared about what she contributed. She and Jill discussed what other people could do to help her feel like she mattered as well as ways she could help others feel like they mattered too. The student put a picture with speech bubbles on her locker to refer to before group activities (see Figure 5). She titled it, “Everyone counts.”

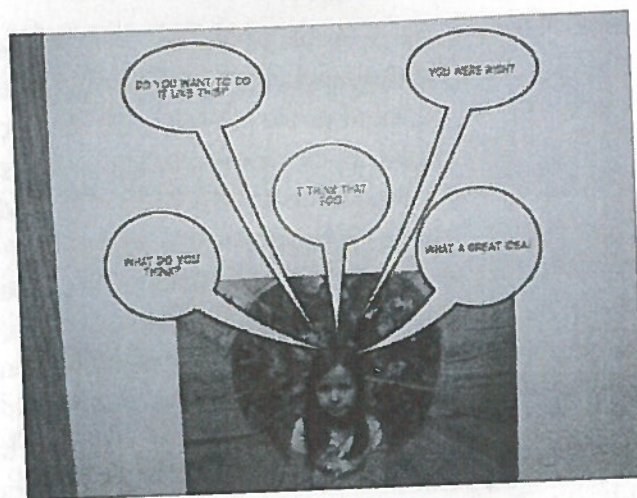


Figure 5. “Everyone Counts” speech bubbles

Making Learning Visible through Documentation

One difference people often notice between our definition of documentation and their own is that our definition contains more verbs than nouns. We put less emphasis on the *stuff* – the artifacts we collect like observational notes, photographs, video, and student work – than the *activities* of documentation. This reflects our belief that, while artifacts serve as a foundation for making learning visible, in order for documentation to be useful, it must be purposeful. We must actually *do* something with it. Documentation is not an end in itself. We document to deepen learning – our own, our students’, our colleagues’ – and to extend that learning to others.

Documentation played a critical role at Wickliffe both in supporting the identity of the group and deepening the group’s understanding of what and how they learn. Below we take a closer look at three distinguishing features of documentation: the focus on *learning*, the attention to process as well as product, and its *public* nature.

Documentation Focuses on Learning

Documentation needs to focus on some aspect of learning and not simply report what was done. Documentation focuses on learning when it promotes conversations and deepens understanding about children’s thinking and learning and effective teaching practices. Depending on the purpose and audience, documentation often includes the following components:

- 1 We refer to teachers here because they are the ones who typically document. But students, administrators, parents, and others can document too!

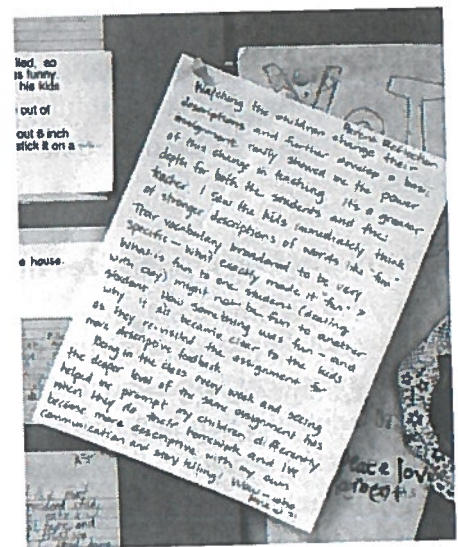


Figure 6. From Display to Documentation

characters had been a popular theme the previous year), Randy Warner, Wickliffe's music teacher, asked students to draw how they saw themselves "experiencing, exploring, and enjoying music." Molly Hinkle changed the wording of her students' weekly self-reflections to ask what the students *learned* instead of what the class *did*. Sarah Giles (now a kindergarten teacher) put up the typical displays of students exploring Unifix cubes, but now she added photographs, children's words, and examples of different problem-solving strategies in order to: 1) show parents the kind of learning their children were engaged in, and 2) show students there were multiple ways to approach problems (see Figure 7).

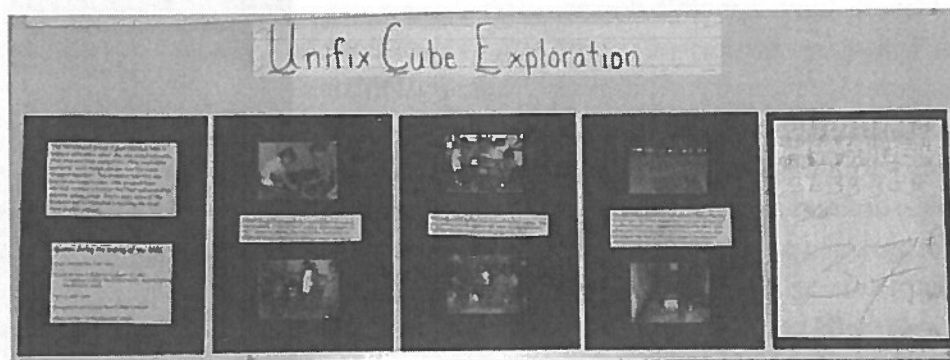


Figure 7. Sarah Giles's documentation of Unifix Cube Exploration

Mark Carter, a fifth grade teacher, changed his approach to displaying work in the hallway by adding more context to student work and sharing more of the students' learning processes. He documented this by photographing students working together, requested individual reflections, and asking group members to think together about their learning and record their understandings or confusions. Mark also posted his learning goals in the classroom, to which he added student input as well.

Documentation Emphasizes the Learning Process as Well as Product

Teachers are often struck by the focus on process in our definition of documentation because assessment typically emphasizes the end result. Yet the process of learning that contributes to the individual's and group's understanding is often as important as the product. Focusing on the process *while learning is still underway* enables teachers and students to engage in formative assessment. Using documentation to listen carefully to children and gauge their knowledge of and interest in a subject supports responsive and developmentally appropriate teaching. Documentation preserves significant moments and examples of student work so they are available for re-examination. Revisiting such moments enables teachers and students to find new meanings, address misconceptions, and identify new paths for learning. Sharing documentation back with students or colleagues allows them to benefit from the ideas, strategies, and even mistakes of their peers.

Focusing on the process of learning *after a learning experience* serves a more summative purpose by making critical aspects of learning not usually assessed in standardized tests visible. At Wickliffe, the use of documentation in formative and summative ways struck an immediate chord. Visitors to Wickliffe frequently comment on the warm and compassionate community the school

has created. The “Community Builders” WIG decided to explore and make the development of empathy in different grade levels visible.

Fourth grade teacher Frank Hatcher paired his students with senior citizens as a way to nurture students’ empathy and conversation skills. The students created a Venn diagram of the similarities and differences between themselves and their senior “buddies.” (see Figure 8) Similarities included: “we all have ups and downs, can’t drive a car, have limited diets, no paying jobs, can’t stay home alone, are always under someone’s care, and no smoking.” Differences included physical handicaps, participation in sports, use of computers, and memories of past experiences.

At the start of a project, fifth-grade teacher Elizabeth Glover now makes her learning goals even more explicit. She asks her students, “How will I know what you have learned?” Elizabeth shares the criteria for assessing the project with the children and documents learning *with* her students.

Third and fourth-grade teacher Deb Flynn now asks her students to revisit different aspects of an assignment so they can deepen their understanding. She might ask students to rethink, rewrite, or redraw parts of a report or to come up with questions about what else they would like to learn. Deb also includes specific examples of children’s work in small groups along with their reflections when she has conferences with parents.

Documentation is Not Private; It is Meant to be Shared

Another difference between more traditional notions of documentation and the MLV conception relates to making the documentation public. Sharing documentation can serve different audiences at different times. Whether documentation is shared in or outside the classroom, or during or after a learning experience, depends on its purpose. Documentation can be used to think through a question with colleagues, brought back to learners to extend their thinking, or shared outside the learning community. Documentation supports reciprocal learning for those who create the documentation as well as those who view it.

Because teachers often work in isolation, “going public” in smaller ways – with others inside the school community – can be an important place to start. When we began working with Wickliffe teachers, the audience for the work in the halls was primarily parents and other visitors. The work on display largely consisted of finished products. New possibilities for deepening and extending learning emerged when teachers began to think of students, their colleagues, and even themselves as an audience for their documentation. The idea of making learning public while it was in process was also provocative.

For example, during Wickliffe staff meetings, conversations became more focused on teach-

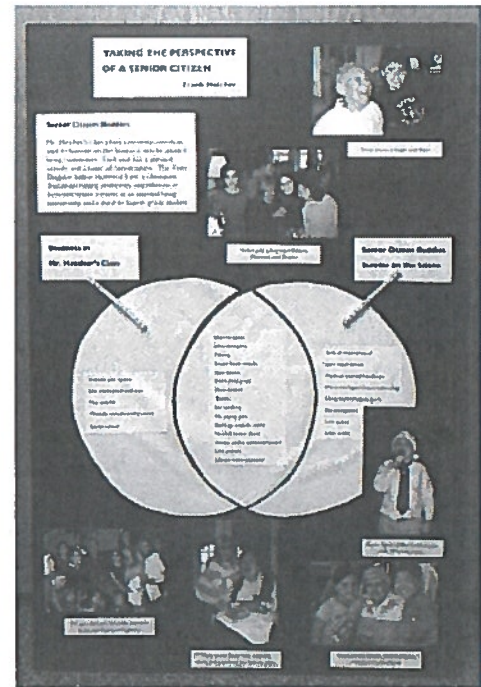


Figure 8. Senior Citizen Venn Diagram

ing and learning when grounded in documentation. (See Figure 9) Kathleen Taps's first grade class visited their fifth grade buddies' classroom during their study of ecosystems. The younger children then posted comments on the documentation.

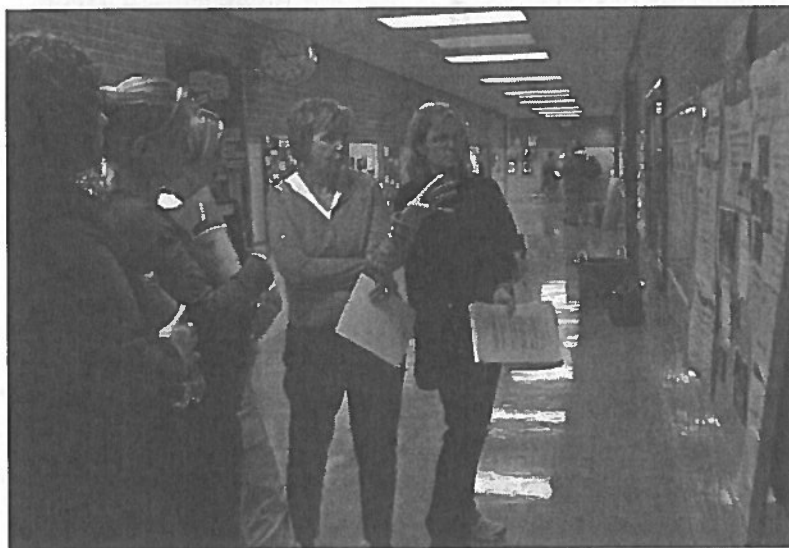


Figure 9. WIG Group discussing documentation during a staff meeting

When Jill Hughes put up documentation in the hall of a conversation in which her students compared their own character traits to those of the animals in Jan Brett's *The Mitten*, it led to a new playground buddy program based on shared traits and interests. The program has since expanded and continues to grow (see Chapter 5).

Several times during our visits, we heard teachers of older children express appreciation for the teachers of younger children for preparing their students to become good group learners. This kind of understanding and appreciation becomes more possible when learning is made visible within and across grades.

As a community, Wickliffe became interested in the idea of documentation as a form of educational advocacy. They saw it as a way to expand the conversation about student learning and achievement beyond standardized test scores and to address the Ten Principles as well. The Spring Exhibitions represented three principles in particular: the school's emphasis on producing as well as consuming knowledge, the value of ongoing reflection, and the school as a center of teaching and learning for all ages. (See Figure 10)

As noted earlier, the process of shaping documentation for public viewing forced teachers to think more deeply and synthesize what they had learned. (This book serves a similar purpose!) The panels were also shared during the professional



Figure 10. The Spring Exhibition

development days at the start of the new school year as a way to provide continuity and remind teachers of their earlier learning. Teachers and administrators from other schools and students in teacher education programs visited the exhibitions throughout the spring. Some of the exhibition panels also had a life outside of Wickliffe. The librarian shared her documentation panel with other librarians in the district and Fred shared his panel with his graduate students and other district administrators.

Concluding Thoughts

In the third year of the OVL project, we asked teachers and parents to share their greatest hopes and fears. One teacher wrote about extending “all of the great learning, conversations, and experiences we are able to have to others who don’t have similar opportunities ...” It is this perspective that underlies the chapters that follow and the companion DVD. We hope that unpacking the definitions of learning groups and documentation provides a useful conceptual framework for the rich examples described in the rest of this book. Making learning visible is not an end in itself. Documentation exists to be shared with learners – children and adults – in order to promote learning as individuals, as a school, and as a larger community.