*Creating the Dynamic Classroom:
A Handbook For Teachers*

Susan Schwartz and Mindy Pollishuke. Toronto: Irwin Publishing Ltd., 2002, 254 pp.
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Schwartz and Pollishuke have done an admirable job in compiling and organizing the physical plans of a classroom for the beginning primary teacher. *Creating the Dynamic Classroom* is organized into 12 practical overview chapters which include such topics as: setting up the desks and classroom layout; how to timetable subjects; planning theme-based units; setting up learning centres; activities and materials for reading; how, where, and when to use computers; partnering and assigning homework with parents; and self, peer, and expert assessment. The authors use their 50 years of classroom field experience to provide the organizational tools and practical materials necessary for the beginning teacher in grades K-4. New teachers who have not had the good fortune of practice teaching in classrooms like that of Schwartz or Pollishuke will be thrilled to find much of the classroom preparation groundwork laid out for them in this book. It is also a useful resource for pre-service teachers.

The philosophical underpinnings of the handbook evolve from Brian Cambourne's 'seven conditions of learning': immersion, demonstration, expectations, responsibility, approximations, practice, and feedback/support/celebrations. The authors provide illustrations of both immersion and demonstration within text format, and also use Barbara Coloroso and TRIBES' theories to provide examples of how to elicit student self-assessment and self-responsibility. An important philosophical approach of the workbook is the triad among teacher, student, and parent(s). This triad, and how to develop such relationships between home and school, is described further in two of the twelve chapters: "Homework: A Window into the Classroom" and "Partnerships with Parents". I think the approach Schwartz and Pollishuke adopt is a common illustration of classrooms across Canada. A new teacher, having recently migrated to Canada, for example, would find the simple explanations and examples helpful in deciphering 'what traditionally happens in a typical elementary school classroom in Canada.'

The "Physical Set-up of the Classroom" provides pictures and explanations of everything from how to arrange desks to how to make a display out of an old appliance box. It provides basic lists for new teachers of what they may want in their classroom.

"Timetabling" instructs the beginner about how much time s/he will need for each subject area. For example, the manual states that one will need more time for integrated, theme-based learning, than for rational subjects such as French. Such structure is helpful for the beginner who may not have fully developed his/her teaching approach yet. This book may be used as a starting point for the new educator. It is a well laid-out structure that will save the new hire a great deal of time in preparation and thought. Eventually the beginning teacher may wish to extend, shape, and change the instructions contained here to fit his/her developing styles and approaches. Not every teacher, for instance, may agree

with the integrative approach as laid out by Schwartz and Pollishuke, and not every educator may use language the way the authors do. Blackline masters (BLM) formatted in Microsoft Word allow for each form to be customized and changed for this reason.

Each chapter is filled with master forms that may be photocopied, manipulated, or printed from the accompanying CD-ROM. For example, if an instructor wished to use the “getting to know each other” forms provided in Chapter Four, s/he could simply print them off the disc. If one wished to alter the student handouts on pages 31-34 to reflect more positive, community-building language, then s/he could. For example, if you wished to write, “Listen”, in place of, “Do not talk” (p.31), then the forms are able to be changed. Initially, I was concerned about this since I believe that discipline should be worded constructively, i.e. “What **can** we do?” rather than, “what **shouldn’t** we do?”

There is one small problem with the Blackline masters. Each form is listed by code in the book. For example, the “cooperative group learning experiences” (p. 31), discussed above, are numbered as “BLM S-7 figure 4.7”; however, when the reader opens the disc, individual figures are grouped together in larger files by number, “BLM 1.doc” ... “BLM 10.doc”. Each file on the CD contains 10 to 15 figures. A list of BLM is provided on both the disc and in Appendix 4 (pp. 240-243). To access and print off a specific form, the teacher must randomly select a file and hope that the figure is in that file. “BLM 1.doc” on the CD contains the BLM figures from the other half of “Classroom Atmosphere” and half of the figures from “Planning an Integrated Curriculum” and so forth. The BLM list matches neither the figure number nor the chapter number in which the figure is presented. As a result, it can be difficult to quickly locate a form. Outlines of unit plans and lesson plans are available on the CD-ROM as well.

Chapter Five of *Creating the Dynamic Classroom* outlines both plans and possible activity ideas for integrated, or theme-based units. Activity webs of “pioneers” (p.55) are presented as an example, and Schwartz and Pollishuke do an admirable job of summarizing and outlining how an integrated unit is organized in Canadian classrooms. Students needing a more in-depth look at the process could refer to larger works such as Gail Tompkins et al.’s, *Language Arts: Content and Teaching Strategies*. There is a wonderful summary of subject area strands on page 49, albeit taken from the Ontario Ministry of Education curriculum, yet applicable to most Canadian jurisdictions. This simple list of learning items would aid new teachers in organizing their thoughts about what to include in a single unit that would cover each and all of the skill sets in the disciplines. Outlines such as this one in Chapter Five are immediately and highly useful to the beginning teacher in organizing a course in a short period of time.

Learning centres are illustrated in Chapter Six. Again, lists of different types of centres, forms for group work, and student self-assessment forms, are available. The variety of centres noted may also be of use to seasoned veterans who are simply looking to re-visit centres they have not used in awhile.

“Literacy and Language Learning” provides an excellent overview of *all* of the types of reading strategies employed in classrooms today. The authors have a predilection towards the “literature rich” classrooms of whole language, but recognize the integrated uses of shared and guided reading styles as well. This chapter does not offer an in-depth description of any one of the reading theories,

but it does provide a good summary for those teachers interested in diversifying their literacy programs and experimenting with the variety of methods in use today.

Chapter 7 also provides tried and true advice on writing. One that I have found useful in my own experiences with student teachers is the following: “Become a writer yourself and serve as a model for your students” (p.129). This is sage advice: it is hypocritical for teachers to ask their students to “write a journal entry for the next twenty minutes” and to then begin to organize the classroom or mark papers. Writing with the students and being involved in their activities conveys the message, “This is important; I like to do this too.” I often use this single piece of advice with English pre-service teachers, and anecdotally, find it very successful.

Chapter 8, “Technology and Learning”, provides a written summary of how computers are used in classrooms today. Technology is becoming an acknowledged form of literacy. Much reading and writing today takes place on the internet, i.e., searching for information, reading and writing e-mails, and exchanging written messages through chat rooms. I think technology could also be used to build the teacher-student-parent triad first introduced in Chapter 1. For example, e-mail may be an effective way to communicate with some parents today; certainly e-mail is more likely to receive a response or ongoing communication than the telephone call to a vacant home.

Chapter 10 on “Homework” lists the common reasons why homework is assigned. It also provides an answer to the age-old question from parents, “Do you have any homework for my child while we’re away on vacation?” (p. 166). The authors provide a very useful outline of creative literacy activities that could be completed on any family trip or outing. With this, parents have an answer to their question (“yes”) and the triad of teacher-student-parent learning is strengthened.

It is most evident in “Assessing, Evaluation, and Reporting”, Chapter 11, that the authors recognize teachers’ time constraints teachers. Primary students are still very dependent upon their teachers, and as a result, during the regular day, teachers are constantly ‘on.’ There is not a minute when they are not teaching, coaching, supervising, or mentoring. One of the biggest challenges at this grade level is finding time during the working day to record observations of students. Here, Schwartz and Pollishuke have provided teachers with quick, ‘on-the-go’, assessment checklists. Writing anecdotal observations on ‘post-it’ notes, for example, allows the notes to be transferred quickly to a “summary sheet” (BLM T-77 Figure 11.3) later. Carrying checklists of the individual skills an educator looks for as s/he circulates around the working classroom (BLM T-8 Figure 11.7), is a simple method of recording the behaviours students are exhibiting. With such lists, accurate data of the students’ daily development can be obtained.

Even after lists and lists of what one needs in the classroom, the question on each beginning teacher’s mind is, “What do I do first? Where do I begin?” Schwartz and Pollishuke answer this question in Appendix 1, a step-by-step guide of “what you need to do once you get your first teaching job.” The authors equip first-year teachers with this survival guide, wish them well, and send them on their way (p.218). From two ‘mothers’ of teaching, *Creating the Dynamic*

Classroom: A Handbook for Teachers provides bits of advice from the classroom home.

References

Tompkins, G.E., Bright, R.M., Pollard, M.J., & Winsor, P.J. (1998). *Language Arts: Content and Teaching Strategies*, 2nd Canadian edition. Toronto: Prentice Hall.

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