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Representing: Elementary to the Exhibition of Learning

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Greenfield Center School (GCS) students have a long history of engaging in meaningful projects as the culmination of their studies. Once students have completed these projects, they own their learning; they understand it deeply and can explain how it relates to themselves as well as to their community.

In addition, we believe that these presentations raise standards. Projects are presented to audiences as authentic exhibitions. These presentations can be to peers, parents, the entire school at our weekly All School Meeting, or community audiences. In each venue, our job as educators is to make sure that students reflect upon how they have grown and what they have learned. Over time, we have refined this work to be more reflective of essential understandings that connect each classroom's studies to the school's mission. The pillars of our mission help students develop challenging academic skills in the service of empathy, equity, sustainability and participation.

Representing

The process of showing one's understandings begins with the practice of representing work, which commences in kindergarten and occurs regularly in all content areas. At GCS "representing" means translating one's learning into a different medium, and then reflecting in writing or orally on this translation. For example, when second and third grade students studied water, they divided into groups for a variety of field trips. One group went to a local sewage treatment plant. They returned to the school and with blocks recreated the process of cleaning water that they observed. Then they explained to the rest of the class how the system worked to clean and re-use water.

Literature assignments typically ask students to represent their understandings as we work to develop perspective, empathy and understanding of self in relation to others and to location. Primes (kindergarten and first graders) create story boards to show the beginning, middle and end of a story. After reading stories together and being taught the parts of a story, students work in pairs to record the story's components. They use rolls of paper so that they can have as much space as they need to draw and write the summaries.

As part of their literature work, third and fourth graders have focused on understanding character. After reading books in literature groups and discussing character traits and how they are evident in literature, each student was assigned to read a book independently and create a "character mobile" to describe the main characters. One student used a Lego bed as a symbol for "patient," a play on words for the quality of "patience." In addition, a Band-Aid was suspended from the hanger because the character fixed things, and a ripped piece of paper with a round hole in it was used to note that "the character was running in circles with so many more options around him." Representing helps students leave concrete ways of thinking to explore more abstractly.

Social studies and science themes always end with representing knowledge. Students build a village in the Colonial era, or make a replica of a period home. Middle school grades represent their notion of the earth's formation by making three dimensional reproductions or terrariums. Students often create poster presentations that have an artistic rendering of what they have learned. They might create videos, claymation productions, plays, or mosaics.

Sharing

The process of representing is not complete until students share their work. Presentations can occur in the context of the classroom, or to peers in other classrooms. They can take place during the weekly All School Meeting, to parent and school community audiences and to other audiences authentically interested in the

students' work.

Presentations to peers can be either the final venue of sharing or practice for a more daunting audience. Author's circles are a common way of sharing writing with peers and receiving feedback. Students must be taught how to provide feedback that is both helpful and positive. They learn to make comments like, "I loved the way you described the feelings of the character. It would have helped me if you talked a little bit about the place in which it occurred." Again, at GCS, kindergarteners begin this type of sharing with peers about their writing, the books that they choose to read, or the constructions they make during independent project time. Students learn how to think about their work, how to explain it, and how to provide feedback.

Often, when students complete a piece of work they know will go to an audience of great import, they first will share it with their peers for critique. In order to provide the best feedback, students return to the requirements of the assignment and the manner in which it is to be presented. For instance, when students completed their math fair projects, they presented to their peers several days before the actual fair. Each student gave feedback to three peers using an evaluation sheet, the same sheet that parents would use the night of the fair. Presenting to peers allowed for honest feedback in time to make changes before the event. Polished exhibitions are performances; good performers rehearse.

All School Meeting

All School Meeting is a weekly gathering of the entire school, led by students, comprised predominantly of their sharing of work. Students exhibit finished pieces, talk about the process of creating the work, explicitly acknowledge the many drafts that have gone into good work, and take questions and comments. All School is a time when students share their "representations." However, not all representations are shared at All School Meeting, and not all sharings are representations. All School is also a time to read student writing or to raise important issues. For instance, during the All School Meeting on December 8, 2006, a variety of sharings occurred:

- Primes (kindergarten and first grades), read two books they had created as part of their literature study of George and Martha. They showed the "Story Grammar Marker" rope they used to deconstruct the parts of the story and explained all the components. Then they read and displayed their illustrated pages of each of those components. Of course, as is expected, the entire school celebrated their success and murmurs of appreciation permeated the room. Many students remembered their own experience as Primes and what it felt like to share this kind of learning.
- Two students from Upper Primes and Middles (second and third grades) read their published books, comprised of stories they wrote and took to final draft, along with illustrations. These books are based on the students' experiences, such as one book about a pet dog named Mozart.
- Upper Middles students (fifth and sixth grades) shared projects that they had created as part of their EcoFair. The three projects exhibited at All School Meeting were created in quite different media. One was a poster board which explained the plight of the Florida Everglades and the actions that can be taken to protect it. A second project showcased a professional looking calendar with original photography that is being sold locally to raise money for endangered species. The third featured a large sand and water table that replicated local rivers and the erosion that has taken place.
- Uppers (seventh and eighth grades) offered a skit showing the issues related to fair trade chocolate. After that, they taught the school about fair trade practices, discussed how to look for fair trade symbols, and took a pledge to eat only fair trade chocolate.

Each presentation ended with questions and comments, a practice students use each day at morning meeting. The questions are usually about the process students underwent as they completed their work: "How long did it take you? How many drafts did you do? How much did you practice? What did you like best in this process? Did you learn anything surprising?" The comments are appreciative, empathetic, and offer thoughtful insights and critiques, reflecting common practices of the classrooms.

To Parents and the School's Community

The Eco Fair is just one example of presentations to parents. This fair was the culminating piece for the Upper Middles' three month study of ecology. Each project needed to show "Awareness, Interconnectedness, and Responsibility." Parents came during the afternoon or the evening to look at the presentations and to ask questions of the students. A list of questions was supplied by the students as a guide for this process. Upper Middles had taken advantage of a peer critique prior to the parent event. Such exhibitions of work to parents and others in our school community occur regularly. Seventh graders act out Romeo and Juliet each year using Elizabethan modern language. Seventh and eighth graders lead debates that include their parents about issues relating to fair trade or child labor.

To a Community Group

Some of the most authentic audiences for our presentations are community groups interested in the results of our students' work. Each year, as part of their data study, our fifth and sixth graders conduct a survey for the town and analyze the data graphically and in writing. The survey results are presented at town meetings and, this year, in a private meeting with the mayor. Not only do the students take their work very seriously when there is an audience like this, but our work provides a real service and saves the town from expending money to conduct this research. In 2006, students surveyed over 400 people in the town about actions they have taken or would undertake to conserve energy. In collaboration with the Greenfield Energy Commission, students collected, collated and analyzed the data and presented it at a town forum and in a special meeting with Mayor Forgey. They were able to answer all questions and were asked to leave their findings with the commission to use as part of the official report.

In addition, each year middle school students present to aspiring teachers at a local college. They evaluate the importance of project based instruction and long term studies, bring evidence of their thoughts, and create a presentation that lasts one hour. Each year this class gets feedback that is incredibly supportive.

To an Evaluative Panel

Having an outside jurist motivates Uppers to invest even more fully in their work. It also opens doors that are sometimes closed at this developmental stage for self reflection and insight. For Ambitious Projects, students are given wide latitude and asked to explain how their project shows ambition, passion, and perseverance. Projects must be prepared using both an artistic medium and writing. Some students explore mathematical concepts and theories that stretch them. Others study a particular type of music and write a symphony. Two years ago a student rebuilt a Model T, documented the process with film, and drove the vehicle in the school parking lot. Murals have been painted to represent the poetry of Maya Angelou, dramatic monographs have been written and acted to show the point of view of historical characters. Students are judged on their presentation as well as the evidence of ambition, passion, and perseverance. Members of the community, parents of students who have graduated from the school, and teachers from high schools which the students will attend are the "judges." There is a time for these evaluators to give verbal feedback at the exhibition, and all students are given written feedback as well.

Accountability, Preparation, and Feedback

In order for student project work to be most effective, we, as educators, must be very clear about what characteristics the students are to exhibit. It is easy to do an Eco Fair project. It is harder to do one that shows "awareness, interconnectedness and responsibility." It is harder still to have students articulate what they have demonstrated in another medium. One fifth grade student designed a web site with four pages: global warming, energy conservation, waste reduction, and better fuel economy. Each page contained three sections. When asked to reflect on the three areas in ecology that had to be addressed he said, "The 'What is it' is the awareness of the issues; 'How is it affecting the earth?' describes the interconnectedness of the issue, and "What can you do?" is our responsibilities."

For years, GCS students have represented work as part of their learning. Whether completing a literature book or culminating social studies and science themes, they have struggled to make choices, translating their knowledge into an artistic medium. Students reflect upon the elements they were to show, the process they went through to do this work, and the products they created. They participate in classroom sharings, learn to critique and receive feedback, and witness weekly exhibitions at All School. These presentations offer examples of good work and are built upon habits of persistence, ambition, service, and care. Clearly,

they raise the standards at the school.

Greenfield Center School is a laboratory school serving kindergarten through eighth grade students in the rural community of Greenfield, Massachusetts which integrates a challenging curriculum with ethical decision-making to develop the skills and convictions for creating just communities. GCS promotes personal growth in an atmosphere of warmth and mutual respect. The school's practices are built upon an integration of social and academic learning. Children and adults create equitable and compassionate communities through active participation in their classroom, school, and the world beyond.

Related Resources

The GCS mission has evolved over the last 26 years, and this is reflected in the learning that is exhibited. Initially, the school focused on building a community in which individuals would grow in an atmosphere of warmth and mutual respect. There was a daily All School meeting which consisted of singing together. Four years later, the mission reflected an expanded notion of the social context of the school; sharings were created to learn everyone's names, to put low status students in high status situations, and to celebrate birthdays and accomplishments. At this time, All School took place once a week and morning meetings were held daily in the classroom to build community.

Several years later, the mission of the school evolved to include the integration of academic and social learning. Academic sharing was added to All School, and parent nights began. Within the last decade, continued refinement of the mission brought an explicit dedication to ethical decision-making, and the creation of "equitable and compassionate communities through active participation in their classroom, school, and the world beyond." This clarified the desire for authentic audiences to which student work could be presented. Taking our work into the community followed naturally.

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