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Editorial Introduction

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Editorial Introduction

by Gordon Wells

This issue of *Networks* is the last in a year that has seen a tightening of constraints, both political and educational, in response to the increasing violence that has characterized relationships between nations, cultures, religions and economic classes. In education, in almost all the richer countries, there has been a tighter focus on "basic skills" and the memorization of an increasingly large body of "core knowledge", assessed through standardized tests, and a concomitant narrowing of the opportunities for student initiative, choice, and sustained investigation of questions and issues that they find personally significant. Teachers feel harried and hurried, with little or no time to explore topics in depth or to seize and develop the "teachable moment".

While forced to meet the demands imposed on them, most teachers know in their hearts that something important has been lost and many are still searching for ways to make learning and teaching more responsive to students' interests and diverse needs and more open to unforeseen opportunities for growth by individuals and the classroom community as a whole. In this climate, teacher researchers have an important role to play, both in carrying out action research on these issues and in engaging colleagues in the efforts to improve praxis through publication of their work and collaborative discussion in their own schools.

In the teacher research reported in the following articles, two themes can be discerned that, although approached in very different ways, have a significant complementarity. In the first two articles, which concern the learning and teaching of science through practical, hands-on activities that lead toward more formal experimentation, the theme that unites them - in addition to the concern with science - is the recognition of the importance of enjoying the activities through which we learn. Both articles describe students as "having fun". To many whose concern with education does not involve them in work with students, the idea of "fun" is suspect; it is equated with "being off-task" or "messing around" and therefore must mean that time is being wasted since, evidently, fun does not go with basic skills and the learning of facts. But, when students describe curricular activities in terms of "having fun", they are more likely to be referring to the deep enjoyment that accompanies - and, indeed, motivates - attempts to solve problems, make connections and construct new understandings. Rather than being banished from the classroom, then, the having of fun should be thought of as intrinsic to profound learning and as being a kind of barometer of the extent of students' wholehearted engagement in what they are doing.

The second theme, which runs through the remaining articles, arises from the reflective stance that their authors adopt. In each case, as the author seeks to understand her or his own practice, it is the importance of listening to others and entering into dialogue with them that emerges as a new or renewed insight. Dialogue brings many benefits: Participants develop greater clarity about their own beliefs and values through attempting to communicate them to others as well as hearing points of view which may challenge or extend their own. True dialogue also involves negotiation of understandings rather than one-way transmission of information. Constructive dialogue is also fun. By focusing on these themes, the authors of this issue's articles take

constructive action to break free of the prevailing constraints that tend to make learning and teaching narrow in scope and lacking in enjoyment.

David Palmer's article introduces the theme of "fun" explicitly - in this case the fun activities that were available in a science center that his preservice teacher students were asked to visit as part of the course he taught. Quoting from their reports, Palmer answers the question: "From the point of view of my preservice elementary teachers, what are the benefits of a visit to the interactive science center?" As well as observing children's enthusiastic interest in the activities (and in some cases sharing the fun), these teachers-to-be also reflected on ways of making the best use of visits to such a center and integrating them into classroom work. Encouragingly, some of them also began to think about how they could modify such activities for use in their own classrooms so that having fun while learning could become a characteristic of their own approaches to (science) teaching.

In similar vein, Richard Frazier shares his fascination with the way in which children assimilate science problems about rate of change to the practice of "racing", which is a feature of many of their informal social activities. Drawing on observations of problem-solving activities in two very different contexts, he observes that the predilection for turning problems into races has the merit of engaging students who might otherwise remain uninvolved; however, with respect to the mastering of scientific concepts, he concludes, it "is neither clearly beneficial nor detrimental to children's learning." The question, then, is how can teachers make the best use of this phenomenon. Frazier ends with a particularly effective example. Recognizing the similarity between races and experiments in terms of the predictions that participants make about the outcomes, a preservice teacher with whom he was working managed to engage her students in careful control and measurement of variables as an essential aspect of the experiment/race in which they were engaged. For the students under observation, Frazier suggests, a concern to understand the situation in which they were really interested provided a better introduction to the practices of "adult" science than prescriptive teacher admonishments. "Going native" and capitalizing on students' natural interests and inclinations is, in fact, to retrace with them the route which has led to many scientific discoveries in the course of human history.

The next article, by Rich Furman, contributes to both of the issue's themes. Echoing the preceding articles, his punning title introduces the important idea that "enlightenment can be achieved by lightening up" and he goes on to describe the place of humor in his own upbringing and how humor has proved a powerful means of relating to others in his work as a teacher and practitioner of Social Work. Two vignettes of his therapeutic work effectively demonstrate the contention in his title. What they show is that, in therapy as well as in the classroom, unremitting seriousness is not the only way to achieve insight and understanding; wit and humor can also enable us to make imaginative leaps that can potentially lead to important connections between apparently unrelated ideas and also enable us to overcome barriers to progress in our understanding of ourselves. However, Furman's focus on humor is also interpersonal in intent. Effective teaching and therapy both depend on the *co-construction* of meaning and this, in turn, requires the teacher/therapist to draw the other(s) into expressing a point of view which they can then explore together. Humor is one way of creating the atmosphere of comfort and trust that is necessary for this process to proceed.

The remaining articles in this issue continue this reflective stance with respect to practice. Using the metaphor of an "interactive time capsule", Michele Stafford-Levy looks back over her life in order to identify key experiences that have led her to her current praxis and her understanding of it. One of the most important insights that she arrives at in this process is that "I must work with learners more in order to deepen that understanding." In exploring this idea further, she introduces the key idea of "dialogue. As she recognizes, reflection is a vital part of the effort to improve practice and understanding. But, as with almost all human activities, the effort is still more effective when reflection is carried out in collaboration with other members of the relevant community.

This is the focus of Cindy Lassonde's article, in which she demonstrates the value of listening to one's colleagues and learning through reflection on what they have to say. The major part of her article quotes from, and presents the results of her analyses of, interviews that she carried out with two of her English teacher colleagues in the middle school in which she works. Adopting a constructivist perspective, she focuses in her analyses on "teaching philosophy", how it grows out of the sum of previous and current experiences, and how it is realized (or not completely realized) in practice. As well as teaching at different grade levels and having different curricular responsibilities, the two teachers she interviewed were also at different stages in their careers, a fact which is reflected in their differing degrees of confidence in allowing or encouraging students to influence the way in which lessons are planned and enacted. Herself a seasoned teacher, Lassonde then reflects on her own teaching philosophy in the light of her colleagues' responses and describes ways in which she intends to change her practice in order to enact her philosophy more completely. As with many teacher researchers, she does not offer implications for the practice of others except in inviting them to dialogue with their colleagues as well as with her text.

In the final article, *Teacher Research: Learning to Listen*, Jennifer Moore recounts her discovery - the hard way - of this important characteristic of effective teaching. Moving to grade 12 from her previous appointment in a middle school and teaching creative writing for the first time, Moore started the year with clear ideas about how creative writers would best be helped to achieve their goals. Quickly, however, she discovered that her students did not all share her goals or have the same needs. Taking the time to reflect, she decided to ask them to tell her what they wanted from the course and how she could help them. Her article describes the changes that were negotiated as a result of her listening to what they had to say. But perhaps the most important discovery she made through reflecting on her experience in this class was that, although teacher research may start with a focus on practice-outcome relationships, it inevitably leads to a critical reflection on the practitioner's own practice. And from there, it is a natural next step to include the students as coresearchers and to investigate, with them, the effectiveness of the practices in which they are jointly involved (see Hume's article in *Networks*, 1.1).

This focus on coresearch will, in fact, be the theme of the next issue, in which the members of the Developing Inquiring Communities in Education Project (DICEP) write about their attempts to involve their students as collaborators in joint activities of various kinds, including reflection on their ways of working together in the communities for which they are jointly responsible.