

# FIELDWORK

NOTES FROM EXPEDITIONARY LEARNING CLASSROOMS

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## INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES: THE ART OF TEACHING WELL

BY BARBARA WAXMAN

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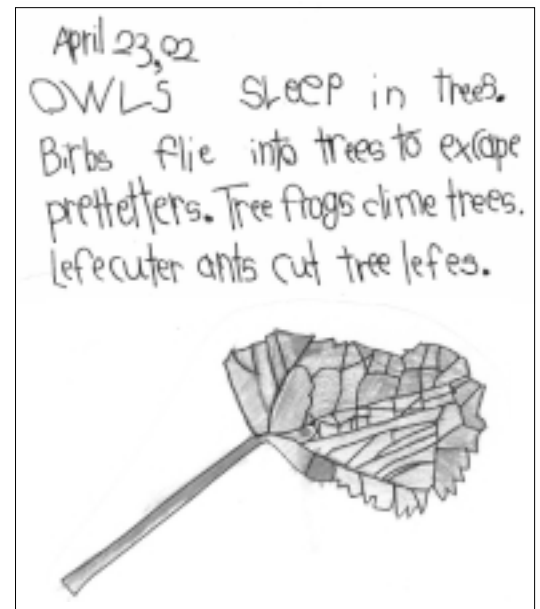
By Susan Derry

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In Expeditionary Learning schools, students are encouraged to be active and collaborative learners: to make connections and find patterns, to analyze relationships and view events from multiple perspectives, to experiment and go beyond the information given, and to develop compassion for events and subjects studied. Learning expeditions provide an elegant and compelling way to structure curriculum so that students are engaged and motivated. We know, however, that the success of a learning expedition also depends on the actual day-to-day and even minute-to-minute instructional practices that a teacher uses to promote active and collaborative learning so that content, skills, and character are deepened and expanded.

We realize that ongoing expeditionary teaching goes beyond simply conducting well-structured learning expeditions to refining instructional practices—those concrete, specific practices and learning structures that contribute to the art of teaching. For that reason, we are focusing on instructional practices this

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The artwork in this issue is by the kindergarten/first-grade crew and the fourth/fifth-grade crew at Schoolcraft Learning Community in Bemidji, Minnesota. The children sketched these scientific, observational drawings as part of their expeditions on the forest and trees surrounding their school. The journal entry and drawing (above) is by Brody Dreyers, a “kinderfirst” student.

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*Instructional Practices, continued from page 1*

school year, and instructional practices will be the theme of the 2002-03 National Conference.

We are talking about more than beliefs here (e.g., “hold high expectations for students”); we are talking about what we do as teachers that embodies our beliefs and causes students to think and create. We know that instructional practices are deeply intertwined with curriculum and assessment. What good is an instructional practice if it is used in conjunction with a trivial pursuit? We know from the outset that good instructional practices are used in a context and for a purpose, and, as much as possible, we ask students to apply what they have learned immediately. Skills are not learned in isolation, and the instructional practice is always about something (as Lauren Resnick said, there is no “contentless” thinking). These instructional practices, when set in the context of a rigorous expedition with well-defined products and projects, ensure that all students do the hard work of thinking.

**CRITERIA FOR GOOD INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES**

**ACADEMIC AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT**

Best instructional practices help foster both academic and character development. For in-

stance, consider the jigsaw technique. In a jigsaw, students become experts on one facet of a topic that is being studied by the class. Each student is responsible for teaching others, and therefore accountable for time spent. Consider also the Socratic seminar, described by Susan Derry in this issue. In a Socratic seminar, students must listen carefully and build on each other’s arguments, and learn to respectfully disagree and to cite evidence from the text to support their views. Students learn to tolerate being challenged by their peers’ ideas; and to use peers’ ideas to create new ideas of their own (also see Jeannie Anderson’s article on science talks in this issue).

In all three cases, students build habits of mind and heart. Instructional practices that weld academic and social skills together foster good citizenship and promote intellectual skills. As a bonus, such practices enhance classroom and school culture because they afford students the opportunity to hear each other’s voices, to deal with multiple perspectives, and to experience what respect looks and feels like.

**CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT**

The best instructional practices provide a kind of minute-to-minute accountability for students so that they always know what they need to be doing, and have a product to show for their time. Thus, good instructional practices also support

better classroom management.

Small group work, which is one staple of an active and collaborative classroom culture, is carefully thought out and time is spent teaching students the skills they need to function well in a group. For instance, students are asked to generate criteria for what makes a well-functioning group, post them, and use them to guide and improve each group session. In

*continued on page 9*

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**COLLECTING INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES**

The instructional practices mentioned in this article are generative, aid in assessment, encourage students to do the hard work of thinking, provide minute to minute accountability, and promote social as well as academic skills. These are practices that will help children learn the content of learning expeditions. It is the start of a list, so far mainly focusing on literacy, that we are beginning to compile from a number of sources (see Resources on page 10). For a more comprehensive version of this list-in-progress as well as write-ups of several instructional practices, please visit our website at [www.elob.org/news/index/html](http://www.elob.org/news/index/html). Keep in mind that other important aspects of the art of teaching such as asking open-ended questions, posing good problems, and wait time are embedded within these instructional practices.

~ Barbara Waxman

# GUIDING CHILDREN TO THE JOY OF READING

BY JEAN HURST

“**W**hat do you know about reading?” It is the second week of school when I first pose this question to my first graders. The responses are quick and confident. “ABC’s!” “Words!” “Stories!” There follows a lively discussion about favorite stories. “It’s really great,” says Carmen. “It’s like I’m right there in the store with him. I didn’t want the little girl and her mom to leave him.”

Carmen has connected with the character Corduroy, and I’m thrilled. I wonder if she will continue to feel that passion when she engages in the reading process herself. I am already a little worried about Carmen. Her kindergarten teachers have noted that she had fallen far behind her peers. In the few weeks I have known her I have seen her be-

come anxious and frustrated with any work that involves letters and words. But, over the course of the year, an instructional technique called guided reading (see Resources on page 5) has allowed Carmen and the rest of my students to take ownership of their learning.

Guided reading—which can be taught at any grade level—is one of several important elements of a balanced literacy program. A small group of three to six children with similar reading behaviors sits down together, talks about, and then tries out a new book on their own. In our classroom this happens three times per week for 15 to 20 minutes per session. While my teaching partner works with half of our class of 31 students on math lessons and activities, I work with the remaining half in language arts.

## ONGOING ASSESSMENT

Recording and analyzing students’ actual reading of text (a running reading record) is a particularly powerful means to discover the strengths and weaknesses in their reading process. A phonemic awareness assessment—a tool that demonstrates a student’s abil-

Samantha Drewes, a student in the fourth/fifth-grade crew at Schoolcraft Learning Community in Bemidji, Minnesota, sketched this balsam fir for a field guide to the forest near her school.



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## STEPS IN GUIDED READING

- ~ Introduce the new book: title, author, a brief synopsis (without revealing the ending)
- ~ Locate known and unknown words
- ~ Discuss briefly the strategies that students can use if they get stuck on a word
- ~ Circulate as students read to themselves; do ongoing assessment and maintain flexible groups as students’ reading levels change
- ~ Discuss book as a group: encourage risk-taking in a safe setting (I highlight some strategies I noticed and students share how they may have worked out a difficult part.)

—Jean Hurst

*continued on next page*

*Guiding Children, continued from page 3*

ity to manipulate sounds in spoken words—can also be enormously helpful. Although Carmen is not yet technically reading, running records show she has a strong ability to continue a pattern and that she uses the pictures to make predictions. The phonemic awareness assessments show that she has a firm sense of rhyme but has difficulty separating sounds in words.

I try to select a book that engages the students' strengths while supporting them as they try out new skills and strategies. On one particular day I share a book that I wrote for them called "What does Mrs. Hurst Like?" In a book introduction, I explain that I am the author and they will be reading the book to find out what I like. I give each child a copy and we look at a few pictures and make some predictions. I have them find a word they know—in this case "I" and frame it with their fingers. When we look at the page that reads "I like balloons," I ask them to say the

word *balloons* slowly and tell me what they would expect to see at the beginning of that word. This draws their attention to print before they begin. I then have them find it on the page.

### LEARNING TO TAKE RISKS

As they get ready to "read" the book on their own I remind them to use their fingers to "make it match." I model that if I say "I like big red apples" and my finger goes beyond the last word on the page, something must be wrong. We talk about how good readers are always asking themselves if what they read "looks right"

## THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR LEARNING

Learning is both a personal, individually specific process of discovery and a social activity. Each of us learns within and for ourselves and as a part of a group. Every aspect of a school must encourage children, young people, and adults to become increasingly responsible for directing their own personal and collective learning.

—Expeditionary Learning Design Principle

(graphophonics), "sounds right" (syntax), and "makes sense" (semantics).

At this point they move apart and begin the books on their own. I move around to hear each child read a page or two and hold quick conversations about their strategies. The dialogue with Carmen on this particular day goes something like this:

"You read, 'I like pizza.' Were you right?"

"Yes."

"How do you know you were right?"

"Because there is a pizza right there" [indicates picture]

"I noticed that when you said the word pizza you were pointing at this word. Is there something in the word that can help you know it says pizza?"

"Yeah. There's a *p* there."

"Wow! You found two ways to check on that word."

The conversation points out the strategy that she uses effectively while bringing her attention to another that could confirm what she did. An effective reading process requires an ability to successfully integrate many strategies simultaneously.

### FLEXIBLE GROUPING

We follow up the independent reading with a group discussion. Next, we move into patterned books that require them to look a

## ELEMENTS FOR A BALANCED LITERACY PROGRAM

The following are the elements that the Ohio State University Early Literacy Learning Initiative includes in their framework for a balanced literacy program.


- ~ Reading Aloud
- ~ Shared Reading
- ~ Guided Reading
- ~ Independent Reading
- ~ Shared Writing
- ~ Interactive Writing
- ~ Guiding Writing or Writing Workshop
- ~ Independent Writing

More information on these elements can be found in *Guided Reading: Good First Teaching For All Children* by Irene C. Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell. See *opposite page for reference*.

bit more closely at print. Analysis of a page that reads “I see a pizza and a cat” leads to a discussion about how those who read “I see a cat and a pizza” thought about the story and used the pictures. We agree that it sounds right, because people can say something like that. We also agree that when we point, it matches. At this point, one child notices that when he read *pizza* there was a *c* there so his first try could not be right. As a group, the students are becoming aware that they can monitor their own reading and have the power to make corrections.

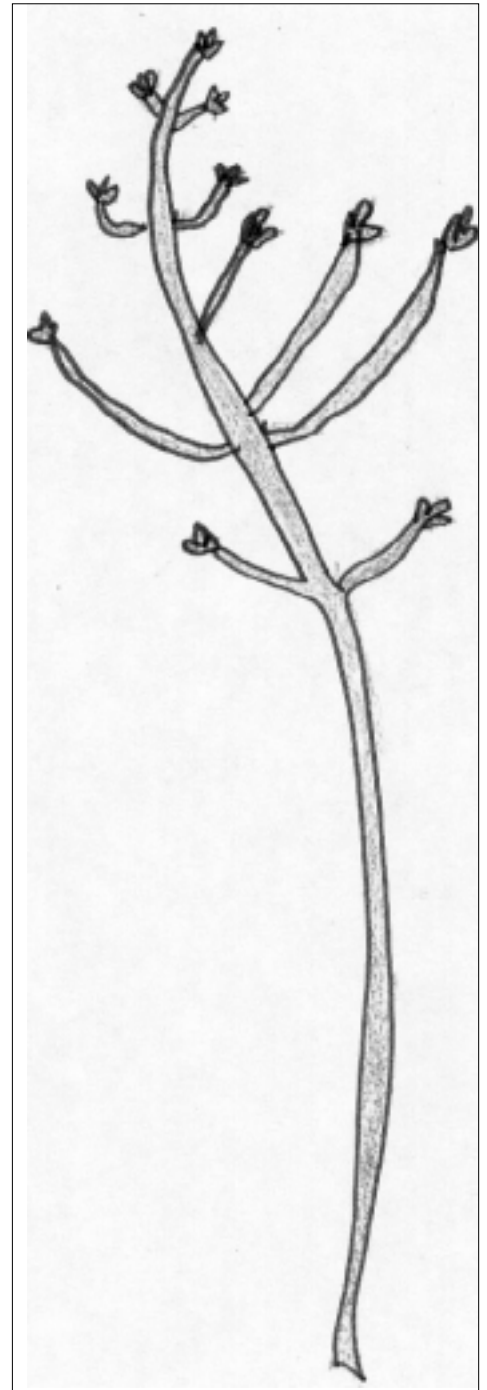
As the students’ reading behaviors shift so does the focus of their lessons. Children who need support in expanding their sight word vocabulary work for a while with books that use high frequency words in many contexts. Those who rely too much on sounding out words are prompted to use other strategies such as rereading at their point of difficulty. The makeup of guided reading groups changes often. Regular

analysis of students’ reading behaviors is what drives both the changes and the selection of books.

It takes some time but Carmen’s attitude toward independent reading begins to change. At first she asks to take her books home to read to her sister. A few weeks later she wants to read a book to the class. As the books become less predictable and more complex she continues to be successful. At that point, no one has to tell her that she had become a reader. The grin on her face as she opened up a new book says it all. 

*Jean Hurst teaches first grade at Genesee Community Charter School in Rochester, New York. “Carmen” is based on the experiences of several students Hurst has taught this year.*

Katija Ward, a kinderfirst student at Schoolcraft Learning Community in Bemidji, Minnesota, sketched this red oak twig as part of an expedition on trees.



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## RESOURCES

Beaver, J. *Developmental Reading Assessment*. Pearson Learning, 1999. (An assessment tool that includes benchmark books for running reading records and miscue analysis. Also includes a comprehension component.)

Clay, M. *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement*. Portsmouth, NH: Heineman, 1993. (A comprehensive assessment tool for young children, particularly K through 2nd grade.)

Clay, M. *Becoming Literate: The Construction of Inner Control*. Portsmouth, NH: Heineman, 1997.

Dorn, L., French, C. and Jones, T. *Apprenticeship in Literacy: Transitions Across Reading and Writing*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishing, 1998

Education Department of Western Australia. *First Steps Reading Developmental Continuum*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 1997

Fountas, I. and Pinnell, G. *Guided Reading: Good First Teaching for All Children*. Portsmouth, NH: Heineman, 1996. (Offers a comprehensive description of guided reading. Includes book lists, practical management techniques and suggestions for organizing the classroom for small group work.)

Keene, E. and Zimmerman, S. *Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader’s Workshop*. Portsmouth, NH: Heineman, 1997.

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# UNDERSTANDING THROUGH LISTENING: CHILDREN CONVERSE AS TEACHERS OBSERVE

BY JEANNE ANDERSON

Nestled among the majestic jack pines and the white paper birch, you'll find Schoolcraft Learning Community, a charter school located at Lac du Bois on the campus of the Concordia Language Village in Bemidji, Minnesota. Up the hill from the lake, teacher Melanie Nelson and her crew of kindergarten and first-grade students are completing a five-month study of trees. These "kinderfirst" students studied wildlife and their habitats, and examined various species of trees. In late April, I had the opportunity to sit down with Melanie and her crew and conduct a science talk.

## SCIENCE TALKS

Science talks are discussions about big questions. A technique which is suitable for any grade level, science talks are a valuable assessment tool and help teachers to hear the depth of children's understanding of a concept. They also provide space for students to think like scientists; to wonder about, hypothesize, and talk about how things work, the origins of phenomena, and the essence of things.

Science talks provide a window on students' thinking. They can help teachers get a clear picture of what children really know, their grasp of scientific vocabulary, as well as any gaps in their knowledge. Teachers use their observations to then make an accurate diagnosis, and plan hands-on activities, fieldwork, and experiments that will address students' misconceptions, questions, and hypotheses. Students will become more engaged in these activities because they truly want to know and want to check their hypotheses. Science talks make students curious and motivate them to work harder and to investigate.

Children learn to acknowledge others' remarks and opinions as well as take turns and listen thoughtfully. Children face each other in a circle so everyone can be seen, and the teacher listens and records the conversation.

Science talks can be useful at the beginning, middle, or end of a learning expedition by providing a path for passions to be explored, or as a reflection of where the students have been on their learning journey. This is one way of informing your own teaching and techniques. Science talks afford an interesting assessment alternative to the KWL chart. In fact, these talks do what the charts do not—they connect ideas and bring out children's conceptions as well their facts.

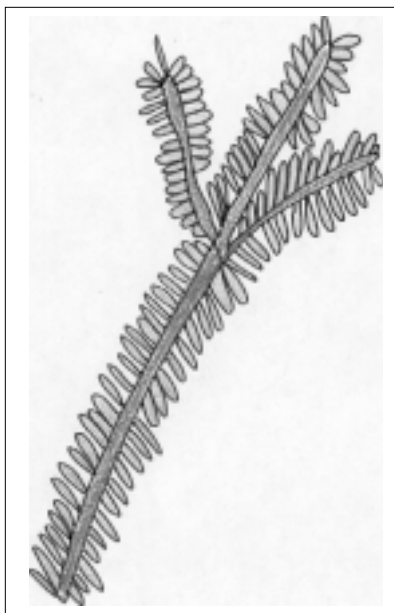
## SETTING THE TONE

We begin the morning with a walk among the trees. Each child chooses a tree to examine. Children are directed to look carefully at their trees, observe the differences, notice the similarities, and *wonder*. Students are looking with scientist's eyes and making complex discoveries. They begin touching the bark, looking at the buds, leaves, and needles. Some students lay on their backs under the canopy of their tree to get a better idea of the vast height. Then we head back into the classroom.

Once inside, we ask students to mimic the growth of a tree. One by one, the students offer their impression of a tree growing. With each act comes a new idea. Soon roots are growing too, slowly arms reach out to the sky, and tiny fingers act as buds and pop out into leaves. At one point, one of the students falls to the ground and announces, "I was cut down by a logger."

We begin a conversation about scientists.  
*Listen in . . .*

Russell Mason, a kinderfirst student at Schoolcraft Learning Community in Bemidji, Minnesota, drew this balsam fir twig during a study on trees.



Jeanne: *What does a scientist do?*

Sade: A scientist is a person who talks and writes down ideas.

Russell: A scientist finds things like bones and does research.

Brody: Scientists record facts and help others learn. They make observations.

And, after establishing some guidelines for the conversation, Melanie and I sit back and listen . . .

Elizabeth: *I was wondering how tall trees get.*

*How do they know when to stop growing?*

Tessa: Trees can get very tall in Minnesota. We have mostly tall trees here.

Sade: They can actually get over 100 feet tall.

Anna: It depends on what kind of tree it actually is. Some trees are supposed to get taller than other trees.

Chance: They can get as tall as Paul Bunyan.

Russell: Red pines can get as tall as 150 feet, like the kind outside our window.

Veronica: *Has anyone ever wondered about how trees grow?*

Isaac: Roots make them grow. The rain seeps into the ground and the roots drink it up.

Sade: Living things need water.

Russell: I think that seeds have holes in them and the water seeps into the seeds and the seeds sprout into trees. It's called a cycle.

Cullyn: Some trees can be planted close together or something and then you have a forest. It can confuse the roots.

Anna: Maybe they get tangled under the ground.

Asa: Trees need nutrients from the soil and water. Nutrients are like vitamins.

Chance: *How do nutrients get inside the trees?*

Elizabeth: Through the roots.

Cullyn: They are called veins. Veins are also in leaves. I think its pollen that's in the leaves. No . . . that's not the word . . .

Asa: Chlorophyll.

Cullyn: Yes, Asa's right. It's chlorophyll and it makes leaves green.

Veronica: *Did you know that certain trees attract a certain kind of bug?* I think it's a . . .

Asa: A jack pine beetle.

Tessa: Yes, and box elder bugs, too.

Cullyn: Bugs use trees for their home.

Asa: It's called a habitat.

Brody: Trees can be used for many things. Birds and animals use trees to escape predators.

Asa: Animals and bugs use trees for shade.

Anna: Birds have babies in them.

Elizabeth: Some things grow on trees. I noticed my tree had *combis* growing on it.

Asa: Actually, don't you mean *fungus*, it looks like green lace.

Anna: And it eats the bark. It can make the tree sick. Just like when we get sick from a rash.

Mary: When a tree gets old it sheds dead branches. That can happen in a storm too.

Asa: Old tree branches can turn into habitats for bugs or animals. When they get rotten, they help the soil.

Tessa: I noticed that my tree had buds on it.

Asa: That's one way to tell the difference about trees. Trees with buds that turn into leaves are called deciduous trees. They shed their leaves in the fall.

Elizabeth: Different kinds of trees grow different kinds of leaves. Some are pointy and some are round.

Cullyn: Brown needles sometimes appear on our pine trees.

Anna: That means it's starting to die. Coniferous trees are always green even in the winter.

Elizabeth: I wonder if the trees look the same under the ground.

Cullyn: It's dug far under the ground so it won't fall over.

Anna: The tree stands up really straight because of the roots.

Veronica: The roots go all over the ground and they

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## SCIENCE TALKS

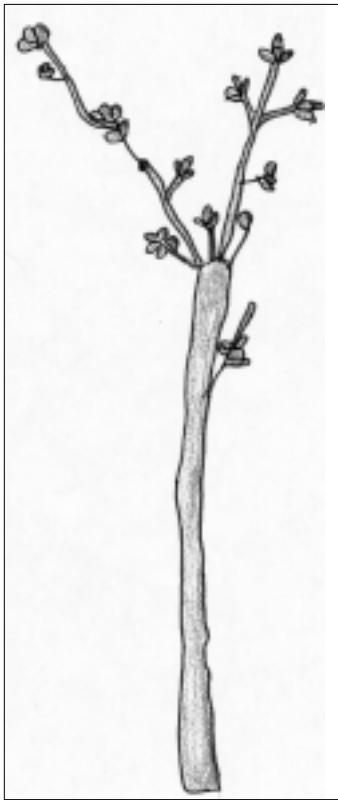
Science talks are appropriate for any grade level, but they are particularly useful for elementary school. Like a Socratic seminar, Science talks deal with provocative questions, often posed by the children themselves. Some recent science talks at Anser Charter School, in Boise, Idaho, include: "What makes a bird a bird?" "How do trees stand up?" "How do plants grow from bulbs?" The questions often relate directly to the expedition topic (e.g., birds, trees, or plants and butterflies).

Our version of science talks are based on work by Karen Gallas: *Talking Their Way Into Science: Hearing Children's Questions and Theories, Responding with Curricula*. NY: Teachers College Press, 1995.

For a more detailed description and a guide for conducting a science talk, please visit the Expeditionary Learning website at [www.elob.org/news/index.html](http://www.elob.org/news/index.html).

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Tessa Grantier—a kinderfirst student at Schoolcraft Learning Community in Bemidji, Minnesota—sketched this red oak twig as part of an expedition on trees.

*Understanding, continued from page 7*

help the tree stand up.

Asa: I think that a tree might look the same underground, only instead of branches, it has roots.

Cullyn: *Did you know that worms are helpful to the soil?*

Isaac: Worms help to make nutrients in the dirt.

Anna: Maybe worms help the roots by making tunnels.

Asa: I think that worms are not as big as roots.

Roots can be this big.

Anna: We do know that worms are important to the soil because we did an experiment with worms.

Sade: I think that the roots just grow like we do.

The roots grow and push through the soil.

Asa: Roots can be as big as some branches.

Tessa: Maybe that's what makes it look like a tree underground and upside down.

Elizabeth: I agree!

### DEBRIEF

The conversation lasts about 25 minutes. Overall, the students retain their enthusiasm for the topic throughout. The student debrief lasts only a few minutes. It is short but reflective and serious.

Melanie: *Can we name two things we did well?*

Asa: We took turns and waited for everybody to stop talking before the next person started.

Anna: We listened to everyone's ideas so we wouldn't repeat an idea.

Melanie: *What can we improve on the next time we have a science talk?*

Elizabeth: We should make sure that the birds don't make so much noise.

Cullyn: I think we could take turns better so everyone has a chance to say their idea.

### FOLLOWING UP

The students are engaged and join the conversation, however there are five children who make no contribution at all or say very little. A few questions come to mind: How do we assess the group when the entire group is not fully contributing? Additionally, the students seem to be

able to identify trees as well as classify them, but have they really internalized the idea of the root system? What can I do as a facilitator to explore this concept more? What are the classroom experiments and center activities that can be provided in order to attain the highest quality of understanding?

One example might be to conduct small group science talks in order to provide a more intimate setting for those students that do not like to speak out in a large group. If we are using the science talk as an assessment, then every voice must be heard in order to define the strengths and needs.

The transcript provides for further analysis of concepts, analogies, theories, and vocabulary. For example, there seems to be some confusion among the children as to how the root system develops and grows. Tessa exclaims that "a tree must look the same under ground, the roots look like branches upside down." Two simple science investigations come to mind, the celery stalk in the colored water, and the lima bean in the zipper-lock bag taped to the window (mini-terrarium). Both investigations provide an up-close look at how water travels through the roots and how a root breaks out of its seed coat and finds its way through the dirt looking for moisture and nourishment. The role of the teacher is to facilitate knowledge by providing opportunities for investigations and higher level thinking, and not to deliver the answer.

We encourage children to take a more active role in their learning, even if it means that teachers are letting go of control. This can be difficult for teachers at first, but they will find that the character of their classroom will slowly begin to change from an atmosphere of students seeking quick and "correct" answers from teachers, to teachers asking investigative questions of students in the pursuit of higher level thinking.

Finally, the talk is transcribed and posted on the wall at student height so the students and visitors can read it again and again as the analysis continues. ✎

*Jeanne Anderson is a school designer in the Midwest with Expeditionary Learning.*

this way, students are held accountable for their behavior as group members, and for a growing awareness of group dynamics and skills. Careful attention is also given to placing students in groups. One staple of good grouping practice is to keep the groups flexible; students are grouped and regrouped depending on needs, interests, student choice, and the desirability of capitalizing on unique student strengths through cross-ability groupings.

### **ONGOING AND FINAL ASSESSMENT**

On a daily basis, how do we know how well students are understanding material, using a comprehension strategy, or working with each other? The best instructional practices provide tools that reveal how students are doing. They not only promote student thinking, they also allow teachers the space and time to see student thinking. Students also need to know up front how their work will be assessed and the specific standards that they are trying to reach through their project. One helpful technique is to invite students to generate criteria through analysis of exemplary models. In this way, students take ownership of the assessment process.

### **DRIVE LESSON PLANNING**

Good teaching means that teachers encourage students to use their prior knowledge, to create analogies and metaphors to express their ideas, and to use intuition as well as logic. As students reveal their prior knowledge and reasoning, they show teachers what they do and do not understand, and point the way to tomorrow's lessons.

Good instructional practices allow teachers to spot misconceptions as well as great thinking. For instance, the reader's workshop is a learning structure and practice that affords the teacher time to confer with students and to see and hear their thinking. Encountering clear evi-

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A failure is not always a mistake, it may simply be the best one can do under the circumstances. The real mistake is to stop trying.

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— B.F. Skinner

dence of students' thinking allows teachers to plan their next instructional moves based on exactly what the students need next. For example, in a workshop on making connections, a first-grade teacher sees that students are making connections that seem random and do not help students make better sense of the text. So, the next day she plans a workshop to move students to contrast the difference between connections that enhance meaning versus connections that do not shed light on the text.

### **GENERATIVE**

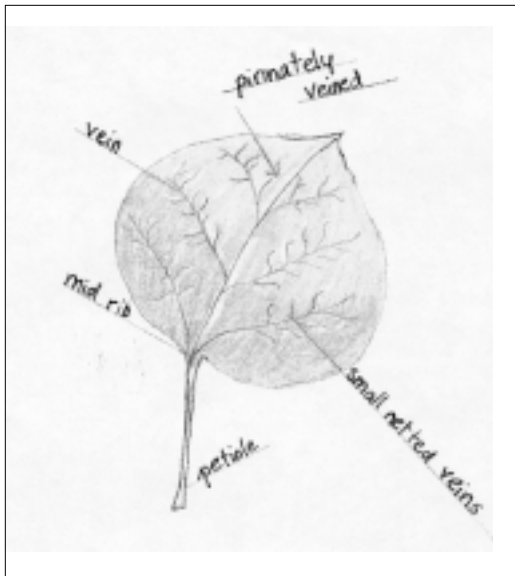
Good instructional practices are not confined to a single topic or discipline; they are generative in the sense that you can use them over and over again with different content and subject matter, and are therefore applicable to many diverse kinds of expeditions. What they have in common is that they push students to learn content, to think deeply, and to master skills.

Scaffolding is an instructional practice that is so generative, and useful in so many different learning contexts, that it merits special mention. Simply put, it is the notion that as teachers we can break down the tasks and components of a concept or project and provide platforms at every interval of learning. For a research project on ethnobotany that will eventually be made into a CD-ROM, for example, students had to write an informative report on a native plant and its uses, along with carefully-rendered drawings of the plant. The teacher scaffolded the project in the following ways: he

*continued on next page*

This picture of a balsam fir twig was sketched by Anna Brittain, a kinderfirst student at Schoolcraft Learning Community in Bemidji, Minnesota, for the "Walk in the Wild" expedition.





Annalise Dobbelstein, a student in the fourth/fifth-grade crew at Schoolcraft Learning Community in Bemidji, Minnesota, drew this aspen leaf as part of a field guide to Bemidji.

I learn these great practices, and then the school year ends. Perhaps over the summer I learn a new one, and then I forget about the other ones that were of great benefit. How do I keep these practices from falling off my plate?

— An Expeditionary Learning teacher

*Instructional Practices, continued from page 9*


modeled each step of the process by writing his own report along with the students and, using the overhead, allowing students to critique his writing. He provided exemplary models of drawings and research re-

ports, and had students generate criteria through analysis of these exemplary models. He created writer's workshops to teach different aspects of research and writing. Finally, he worked with the art teacher to teach plant-drawing techniques.

## PRACTICING INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

What helps us get better at instructional prac-

tices? It's not enough to simply know about these practices. First, we have to remember to do them. Naming the practices and posting them somewhere is one way to begin. Another hint is to conduct the practice on a regular basis so that we gain skills and can begin to internalize the practice so that it truly becomes part of our tool-kit as educators. Sharing the "how it went" with colleagues is another way to fine-tune the practice. If all teachers on a team agreed to try a Socratic seminar and then shared problems and highlights with each other, facility with the practice would quickly grow. Focusing on an instructional practice also enriches common planning time. Many teachers have said that this sort of collaboration keeps them from giving up on an instructional practice during the acquisition phase.

Collaborating also helps in adapting and refining the practice for a particular group of students or expedition. Inviting a colleague or school designer in to observe the use of a practice and then hearing the feedback is another way to get better. Observing an experienced person use the practice provides another source of helpful expertise. Finally, active participation, as a learner, in good modeling of the practice is an excellent means for internalizing a practice. Indeed, Expeditionary Learning's professional development is designed to do just that. 

*Barbara Waxman is a school designer in the Northwest Regional Office of Expeditionary Learning.*

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# Just STARTING

## SOCRATIC SEMINARS

BY SUSAN DERRY

Socratic seminars? That sounded a little lofty for my argumentative, concrete-thinking bunch of sixth graders at Lincoln School in rural Oakland, Oregon. And then there was the preparation and the setting the stage and making sure everything was just right so it would be successful. For me, it was like gazing through the rain-spattered window on Saturday morning, knowing I needed to get my peas in the ground, but also knowing it would be uncomfortable if I did not layer on the clothes, lace up my boots, and dig out my gloves. And of course the empty fridge, mountain of laundry, and ringing phone always beckoned. Excuses, excuses. The best advice I ever received when pondering how to go about a murky or difficult task was, “Just start.” So it was with Socratic seminars. We just plunged in.

We had finished literature circle books on Asian immigrant and refugee experiences. Small groups had read *The Starfisher* and *So Far From the Bamboo Grove* by Laurence Yep, *The Clay Marble* by Minfong Ho, and *Dragonwings* by Yoko Kawashima. I wanted the students to share their stories with the class through relating to a common text. I came upon the article “The Shaping of *The Clay Marble*” by Minfong Ho. In this revealing personal essay, Minfong Ho recounts the experiences that compelled her to write the story of Cambodian refugees who fled the Pol Pot regime. We held our first Socratic seminar around this text.

The *World Book* says Socrates was devoted to bringing out the truth and goodness in people. (I had to look this up afterward because I wondered if there had been anything

“Socratic” about our seminar!) Wow. This actually happened. We made our inner and outer circles. We discussed the ground rules and expectations. And then I posed the question: “When we write, we have a purpose for our writing. In the same way, authors write books for a reason. What makes a story worth telling? What compelled Minfong Ho to write hers?” The dialogue began as a trickle but soon flowed steadily, even gushed at times, as one idea lead to another and students spun off each other’s thoughts. At times the talk within the circle was so intimate that we had to ask participants to speak louder so we could hear. Before I knew it, the students were discussing the themes of their books. (Ohmygosh!! THEMES?? That elusive, lofty concept that normally gets you blank stares??) And because the students had to quote text to support every comment, it brought out the goodness and truth from the essay and, even better, in each of them.

In debriefing from this and other subsequent seminars, important lessons flowed from the “mouths of babes.”

Underlining and note-taking helped me understand better.

I read it more carefully than I usually do.

The longer article last time

*continued on next page*

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### SOCRATIC SEMINARS

The Socratic seminar is used in many Expeditionary Learning classrooms to promote student thinking and meaning making. It offers a structure for a whole-group discussion that encourages the ability to debate, use evidence, and build on one another’s thinking. The seminar provides an active role for every student, engages students in complex thinking about rich content, and teaches students discussion skills.

An example of a format for conducting a seminar is available on the Expeditionary Learning website at [www.elob.org/news/index.html](http://www.elob.org/news/index.html). For a related article, please see “Reading Journals, Socratic Seminars, Class Novels, and Literature Circles” in *Literacy All Day Long*, edited by Emily Cousins, Amy Mednick, and Meg Campbell (Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 2000).

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# FIELDWORK

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*Socratic Seminars, continued from page 11*

## SAVE THE DATE!

### LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

*The Principal as Instructional Leader*

March 19, 2003

### NATIONAL CONFERENCE

*Instructional Practices in the  
Expeditionary Learning Classroom*

March 21 & 22, 2003

### SCHOOL VISITS

*Harbor School & King Middle School*

March 20, 2003

**Location: Portland, Maine**

gave us more to talk about.


I missed being in the circle. I had things to say.

The hardest parts for me have been locating dynamic text and coming up with that thought-provoking question. The hardest parts for the students have been learning to take turns without interrupting, refraining from spouting off opinions that are not anchored in the text, and learning to address their peers instead of me. The easiest, and most rewarding, part for me has been watching them discuss big ideas all by themselves.

This has been a lesson in student empowerment. The playing field is leveled. Everyone is an equal, even me. The Title I students stepped up. The argumentative boys piped down. The sharing of ideas in an accepting environment has spilled over into crew meetings and general classroom culture.

The ultimate assessment of our Socratic seminars, however, came from a student. Near the end of one particularly thought-provoking dialogue, Corinne half whispered, in her articulate little voice, somewhere between a secret and a prayer, "You know, I'm feeling like we're almost a family here."

The peas are flourishing and so are the kids.

Just start. 

*Susan Derry is a sixth-grade teacher at Lincoln School, a middle school in Oakland, Oregon.*