

**Making Learning Visible Reflection**  
**Pam Richardson**  
**September 10, 2008**

Years ago, during a time that seems like a lifetime ago, I was a camp counselor. We would often take the teenage campers on overnight bike trips of 50 to 75 miles. The campers were always excited before embarking, even if the excitement was really to cover for the nervousness. What we knew and they didn't was that the first 5 miles were all uphill on dirt roads. It would break even the toughest. Among us counselors, one of the best parts would be to get to the top of a big hill, turn around and ride back down (as 13-year-olds halfway up the hill looked at us like we were absolute morons). On the second trip back up, we would put the bike into a low gear, and place a hand on the lower back of a struggling rider while we rode next to them. The feeling of pushing a rider up the hill was potent and indescribable. I was never able to put it into words at the time. Now I can.

The reason that pushing someone up the hill felt so good was the moment of critical mass. This was the moment where a discernible change happened in the spirit of the rider being pushed. At that moment, she would realize that she could do it, she could make it to the top. She would thank the pusher at the top. But the pusher and the pushed knew the secret. The pusher was just lighting a fire that was already there. I mean, if you want to get scientific, my arm lightly touching her back probably wasn't helping all that much. But it was enough. It was enough to make her realize that she could do it.

In the life of a 13-year-old, this is a momentous occasion. I hope, and think, that it's also one of many moments in which the child begins to mold herself, rather than being the recipient of many artists pinching and rolling upon her. I always hoped that for those girls, that ride up the hill became a metaphor. Something to look back on when the inevitable challenges of life came along.

This year I found something better than pushing those girls up the hill. I found the joy of watching, really watching, and really knowing three-year-olds, four-year-olds, and five-year-olds. Not just the cute ones. Not just the ones that rise to the top. Not just the ones that push my buttons. All of them. I played beside them and tried my best to take on the world from their lenses. Yes, I did come to see many phenomena with new eyes. I had never really appreciated the way soapy bubbles will slowly fall from a whisk held in the air, nor had I properly considered the best possible sound effects for a toy robot. But these were peripheral benefits. The real joy in observing children was the ability to help them find their voice and use it.

We adults take this skill for granted. We are inundated with visual and auditory information and are surrounded by other adults with opinions and thoughts on about every topic one could think up. We ourselves have opinions on innumerable topics.

Making an observation or stating a question out loud seems like such a simple task. But it's not.

I chose to teach in an urban setting. I student taught in suburban, private, and urban settings. I grew up in an incredibly small town, so none of these settings were really familiar. For some reason, urban felt like home. But I've been shy about making my decision overtly political. I am a white woman teaching a population that is predominantly African-American and Latino. I teach in a neighborhood with an incredibly complex history that has been smack in the middle of much of the violence and crime and the always accompanying poverty that has plagued Boston in the past two years. But I refuse to think of myself as a rescuer. I've read Paulo Freire's work. I am one of the oppressors, even if I am an unwilling oppressor, the color of my skin makes me one. I refuse to think of myself as the one with the answers. The difficulty is knowing what I am. I cannot change myself into one of the oppressed, and I can't be a rescuer. So what am I?

Perhaps the answer is, I am a documentor. I am hopefully a skilled teacher. But to move beyond skilled teacher to master, and to be a part of the solution, we must be documentors. The key is to see the world from all perspectives, and to then give voices to all of these.

How has my practice shifted? I now have the gift of sight. The permission, the ability, and the tools to truly see. I saw Owen last year. Many may have seen a child that would come to school tired and that could only recognize two letters. Many may have seen the child that was not particularly verbal. That is not what I saw. I saw a child with enormous and deep brown eyes. He came to school every day well dressed. He came to school every *day*. I saw a child with a loving family. The fact that he did not have a bed for himself didn't matter. I saw a child that studied the world. Who spent a half an hour studying the way bubbles fell from a whisk? Owen. Who noticed the random detail in the corner of an illustration? Owen. Who had a sound effect for everything? Owen. Who oozed interest in slimy critters with every pore of his skin? Owen. At the end of the year, Owen still only knew a few letters, but he wrote the word snail – because he wanted to, because it meant something to him. Who got the entire class interested in worms and snails? Owen. Who beamed with pride when his mother looked at his snail drawing? Owen.

Owen could have easily been the unseen in my classroom. Not a behavior problem. Not particularly academically gifted. Not particularly verbal. Plays pretty well with others. It would have been so easy for Owen to go unnoticed. But because I learned to truly see, I saw him. I don't know if that will mean anything one year from now or twenty years from now, but it meant something to him then and it means something to me today. It means that every time I see his kindergarten teacher, I ask how he is. It means that his brother came to me on the first day of school and told me that his mom said to say hi. It means there's a connection. And in a data driven world, I believe it's the human connections that will actually drive the data the direction we need it to go. It's the human connections that make the learning meaningful. It's the voices of people like Owen that will eventually be the solution. I hope that I played some small role in helping

Owen find his voice. Just like with those bikers I pushed, I did not give Owen anything. I helped him find the spark already within him.

After two days with my children this year, I see so many things. I see so many young children with entire worlds locked in their beautiful little heads. Maybe by the end of the year, I can help them share what they know. What's exciting is that the tools I need to see, the camera, the pen, my colleagues, are all in place. I know the routine I developed last year worked. Thinking & Sharing. What will it bring this year? What gifts will it bestow? On this rare occasion, the gifts will deserve the anticipation.