

Robot Project Revisited: One Parent's Reflection

Jurriaan de Jong, 2006
(Wickliffe Progressive Community School)

The homework assignment from my daughter Eliane's Kindergarten Teacher (Mrs. Mengali) during the week of October 2nd was to make a robot head and bring it for 'show and share' on Monday, October 9th. My daughter and I spent the previous Sunday morning planning, measuring, constructing and painting a robot head and body (the addition of the body was Eliane's idea). Both Eliane and I enjoyed this process for what it was—and these are the key words "for what it was." I believe now that Eliane could have found much more enjoyment, excitement, learning opportunity and ownership if the approach to the project had been different. For this project was driven in the final analysis more by myself than by my daughter. She offered some ideas, helped with measurements, taped, spray-painted, and found buttons and eyes for the robot. But there was so much more to her involvement to this project that I missed and that I will change in every future project with her. I can see in retrospect after attending Thursday's meeting at Wickliffe...and viewing the film about the kindergarten class in Boston that the approach I took to making this robot is not one that I would repeat. Below I will discuss what I learned that evening...and how my learnings affect how I will approach future projects with my daughter.

Let me begin my description of our first robot experience by saying that I am an Industrial Engineer. I enjoy projects—start to finish, measured correctly, final product streamlined and functional. I also...did not receive the benefit of a Wickliffe education. After learning more about making learning visible and children's group learning, I realize that my childhood learning was nothing like this—I was not given control of my learning process. Having said this, I will now briefly describe my experience of making a robot with Eliane. In my mind it needed to be done well—measured and functional and looking nice. While I included Eliane in the process, I remained in control of the final product. While I asked for her input, I had already envisioned the basic structure to our experience. While we were making the robot I felt we were making it together and she was telling me what she wanted for a robot. In retrospect I feel I was making a robot and she was assisting me in the process.

[The following summarizes what I learned] on the night of Thursday, October 12th—the evening that I attended the meeting at Wickliffe. The topic of the evening was the work that the Harvard consultants had been doing with the Wickliffe teachers—"making learning visible"—or deepening the learning process through the use of documentation, documenting the learning experience, in my own words. None of these words nor the words of the Harvard consultants describe what this means as well as the 30-minute DVD that we, the parents, were shown that evening.

The DVD was about a kindergarten in Boston MA. The teachers had decided to do a learning project with the class about a topic that one probably wouldn't have expected—the Boston Marathon. The goal, as I understood it, was to have the class learn about a topic that they knew nothing about (“a marathon is a lot of shows on TV” was the only definition that one of the children could come up with), but even more powerful, learn to learn something together, as a group, learn to ‘work’ together, listen to each other, and provide and take feedback.

This DVD should be watched by anyone who has a relationship with children: parents, teachers, grandparents, family, friends, and neighbors. It was so impressive to see what a (group of) 5 year old(s) is capable of accomplishing. Nothing that I will try to explain about the DVD will do it justice, but I'll try anyway: After the children learned in small groups about the marathon, tried to run one around the school to experience how far it was, and attended the actual Boston Marathon, they were going to document the marathon. The children came up with the ideas to write a book, create sculptures, and make a movie. One of the most powerful segments in my mind showed how 2 boys and 1 girl came up with a storybook for the movie. Without any obvious intervention by the teacher, the kids worked for more than 30 minutes on drawing 20 or so pictures to describe the different topics that they wanted to film, from the ‘really really difficult to draw wheelchair guy,’ to the dehydrated runner, to the cups on the floor, to the helicopter and finish line. Throughout all that, they were asking each other questions, encouraging each other, feeding off of each other, giving each other feedback, and were having a lot of fun along the way. Again, you have to see the movie to really appreciate it.

Now back to my own robot experience. After watching the movie and discussing it with the other parents and the Harvard consultants, I realize now that I will do a few things a bit differently in future projects with my girls. Our robot project can basically be summarized like this: Eliane helped me make the robot; she was ‘involved’ in the decision making process—in the brainstorming and in the construction. At the end of the day I was perhaps more focused on ‘doing it right,’ making sure the robot would look nice and wouldn't fall apart that Monday afternoon.

With future projects, I will turn the roles around. I will be the helper (facilitator) and I will focus more on letting the children figure things out for themselves, giving them support where needed and on ‘reviewing the results’ (likely not always with a movie, but if nothing else through pictures such as the ones we took of making the robot). I began this robot experience understanding the value of time spent with my daughter, wanting to teach her new skills, and trying to help her to learn the ‘correct’ way to do things. I have learned that through brainstorming together, putting my child in the driver's seat, documenting her thoughts and actions, and helping her to put them together as something concrete, I help her to open her mind and learn to think—and in the process I can feel my mind is more open as well—and I am having a lot more fun!



Eliane's Robot
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