



Words of Wisdom for New Teachers – In Fact, for All of Us Brenda Kaylor Interviews Shari VanderVelde

(Adapted transcript of video clip featured in the November 2015 Mentoring Memo)

Introduction: In this segment, Shari VanderVelde, 4th/5th grade teacher at Orchard Avenue School, Grand Junction, Colorado, is interviewed by Just ASK Senior Consultant Brenda Kaylor. Shari provides thoughtful and provocative responses to Brenda's reflective questions. Brief classroom episodes add visual reinforcement for Shari's comments.

Brenda: How do you coach beginning teachers in terms of the world of planning?

Shari: Planning takes so much expertise, but you have to start somewhere. Paula Rutherford's work and the work of the DuFours have been very useful to me. At Orchard Avenue, we use the ovals. Basically, the ovals are, "what do we want our kids to know and understand and be able to do?" We have to start there. We have to start with the end of mind. Then we have to be thinking about, how are we going to know when they've arrived; or, if they haven't arrived, as the case may be. What are our evaluative tools going to be? What are our assessments along the way? We need to consider not just the summative assessments, but the formative assessments, the things that we do on a daily basis to help us understand if kids get it. And then, of course, we consider what are we going to do with the kids that don't get it and what are we going to do with the kids that already know it. We have to think about different levels of scaffolding for kids, and all of those differentiation tasks that are at our disposal for our writer's workshop, reader's workshop or whatever we're doing.

Brenda: What is the secret in success of formative assessment?

Shari: Everything I'm doing in my classroom all day long leads to formative assessment. If I'm asking kids a question during a focus lesson and I'm listening for their answers, that's a formative assessment because it provides me with information about what they know or what they don't know. If they're doing a turn-and-talk and I'm listening in on a couple of different partnerships I get very rich data about who understands, who doesn't, who's off topic. All day long as a teacher I am gathering bits and pieces of data. Whether you write them down or not is another matter; I have to because otherwise I forget. When I take kids' writing home, when I take their book journals home, when I take their math papers home – all of those things are a form of formative assessment. If you wait until the end of the unit to find that stuff out, it's too late. Too many people think that data involves numbers and that it has to be quantitative but data can be very qualitative. So when I'm carting home a whole pile of student's writing notebooks, that's data. Part of the data is how many pages they have written and how they are incorporating the spelling strategies that we've been talking about. That's all data right there, in my hands, on my dining room table. How



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many kids ask questions? Is it the same kids over and over again? Are they asking the same type of questions? That's another form of data. Are they getting their homework in on time? That's data. Are they getting their assignments in on time? All of it can be considered data. So everything that I'm doing in the classroom – is assessment, is data that helps guide the next steps for instruction.

Brenda: How do you keep your ears and eyes open for misconceptions and how do you predict where they might surface?

Shari: The Underground Railroad is a very common misconception for a lot of kids at that age. The Underground Railroad: it's underground, it's a railroad. That kind of thing is all over the place for kids. Not just the Underground Railroad, but many terms like that, and you just have to be alert 100 percent of the time. For instance, as part of the focus lesson, during the engagement part when kids are talking, I listen in on as many of those that I can to hear what kids are saying and if they get what I'm talking about. We have to do the same thing during conferences. In Mallory's case, I discovered her misconception when I was reading her work at home. Another thing I have to do as a teacher is take those piles home and make sure the bag gets into the house, not just in the car. I read the homework and skim it quickly and see where kids do not understand things. Even when it looks like the whole class is getting it and the kids are raising their hands and giving the right answers, there's always two or three of four or, heaven forbid, sometimes more who don't get what we've just done and I just have to be Johnny-on-the-spot and go put out those little brush fires and help those kids make that little turn and figure out what we're talking about.

Brenda: There is a depth of understanding that shows up in the talk that we listen to between you and the students and between. How do you structure the classroom? What do you do to ensure that kids have conversations at that level?

Shari: I think the part of what makes for a rich and productive classroom is when kids talk to one another. One of the things I think that we have to do for kids, at least that I've had to do in my classroom, is to be so explicit in how you do that. Even with fourth graders I've had to model and do little fish bowl demonstrations for kids where my partner and I get together on the floor or pull up our chairs together and show them how to do that. We show how we sit knee-to-knee, look each other in the eye, start a conversation, and how to ask thick questions as opposed to thin questions. We can do a whole unit on that; we have our posters up around the room that ask: What are good questions? How do people behave when they're listening and showing they're listening? How do you build on those comments? That is a curriculum right there. It's the curriculum of talk. And so it's just like anything else, it starts slowly. In a first grade classroom it looks like two kids sitting together reading a book with the book between them. By the time they get to fourth grade,



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three and four person teams can give one another some very specific feedback. But I have to model that for kids and be okay when it's not quite the way I'd like it to be. I can't tell you how many times I've been disappointed in the quality of talk. But that just means that I need to backup and do a better job of teaching how to engage in good talk.

Brenda: What about the classroom environment, the structure of what is on the walls, how you arrange tables, chairs, desks, and bean bags. How do you set up the room as a learning place?

Shari: The environment is crucial. I'm spending all day there so I would like it to be comfortable and welcoming and the kids are spending all day in there with me so I'd like it to be comforting and welcoming for them as well. I prefer tables because they facilitate interaction with kids. If I can get them in my classroom, I always ask for round tables. You can put four kids there, they can face each other, they can put their stuff underneath their chairs and have the tables clear as needed. There has to be space to move between tables so the tables aren't too close because otherwise you don't get a lot of independent work done; you want to make transitions easy. There also has to be a gathering spot. That's our community spot. That's usually the first thing I make sure I have in my classroom. You can have a couch or some comfortable chairs there or not, but there has to be a place where all of us can gather together and be close – not in chairs, not in desks - just together on the floor. You have to have enough space for that and if you don't in your classroom, you have to be able to move desks or tables quickly.

As far as wall space, I don't know any teachers who don't wish they had more wall space. Things go up on the walls that the kids have created together. We have charts from our writing units. I don't have enough room to keep up the charts from the previous writing units but I wish I did because each unit is built on the previous unit. And then we want our charts up for reading asking: What do good readers do? How do you choose good books? What are all the different themes we've looked at? We need to have our charts up for mathematics and all the different cool things we've learned in math, science and social studies - and there has to be a place for art. Those displays have to be constantly rotating because there's just not enough space for them so we sometimes use the hallways. There also has to be space for kids to meet with their groups; sometimes I assign that space to facilitate that movement.

Brenda: What are the systems that you use to make sure it is not only a positive learning environment but a productive learning environment.

Shari: That's one of the things that is right up there on the priority list at the beginning of the year: How do you get kids transitioning quickly and effectively? Who is your paper passer? Where do kids turn in their work when they're done? All of those are things that you have to think out. If you're a detailed oriented person you probably have lots of good



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things going on and if you're not a detail oriented person that's where you need to find a teacher nearby who is. Go into their room, look at how it's done, and just take those ideas and run with them. I've done that all of my life because I'm not real good with the details, but I've had teachers who work right next door to me that are extremely organized and can set up for a really great lunch count or a really great job system so the kids all know what to do and when to do it. Then you just steal those ideas away and do them in your own classroom. As far as a productive learning environment in general, I think that it's somewhere in between noisy and absolutely quiet. So when you walk into a room, there's probably some talking going on but it's quiet and it's not disturbing the other kids. You can tell when there's a useful productive buzz and when it's way off track. It's pretty obvious; you just have to stand in the middle of your room and listen and watch for it. I think a productive buzz is what you're going for.

Brenda: What do you know now that you wish you had known at the beginning of your career?

Shari: Everything! But if I could give you just one: the power of collaborating with teammates. I did not understand that at the beginning of my career, and in fact, I didn't get that until about eight years ago. It is so powerful! It is really, really, powerful to work with other people to make your instruction better.

Brenda: In a learner-centered classroom, what is the role of the student?

Shari: They have almost as much responsibility as I do for their learning. We create rubrics and checklists together, they know what those are up front at the beginning of the project because they've helped develop them; I ask them to have them out almost all the time when they're working on their writing, that way they know what the outcomes are, they know what they're supposed to be doing and they know where they're headed. Part of the work they do in their writing teams, in their book clubs, or in their math teams is help each other stay on track and remember what it is that they're supposed to be doing. I think that part of growing up and the developmental work of nine and ten year olds is to learn how to take responsibility; part of that is your school work so that's their job too. We're in it together.