



The Adaptive Dimension: The Road Not Taken

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A team of teachers in a K-12 school in Birch Hills began to question the assumption that it is a responsibility of teachers to adapt curricula to meet the diverse needs of their students. They noted that teachers have been reluctant to use the Adaptive Dimension, a foundational piece built into the Saskatchewan curriculum that directs teachers to ensure success for all students by making changes to content, instruction, evaluation, and the learning environment. The teachers asked: Who can best make adaptations to ensure student success? When their answer was “the student” rather than “the teacher”, they decided to explore whether or not sharing responsibility for the Adaptive Dimension would lead to more frequent and more effective use of curriculum adaptations.

Calling themselves Team Do-Well, the teachers began their project with a period of intense reflection and discussion. They identified their common beliefs about teaching and learning and wrestled with the scary idea of “letting go” of responsibility to create a partnership between

teachers and students. Two questions focussed their discussions:

- What changes did students need to make?
- What changes did teachers need to make?

The members of Team Do-Well found it relatively easy to identify tools that would help their students to take responsibility for successful learning. Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligence was one such tool and their agreement on its value provided a lens for assessing other tools. A good learning tool had to honour diversity and be endorsed by current educational research and positive teacher experiences. They decided that a students’ “tool box” should include multiple intelligence, learning styles/modalities, goal-setting, Bloom’s taxonomy of learning, choices, memory strands, note-taking strategies, the Second Step program, risk, responsibility, self-evaluation, quality work, emotional intelligence, and study strategies. All team members introduced the tools to their students in their own ways and gave them

opportunities to use them. The reaction of students was overwhelmingly positive:

They loved it! They loved seeing themselves on paper; they loved the recognition; they loved connecting who they thought they were to what they were seeing about themselves on inventories; they loved examining their parents, friends and teachers to see how they learned. Most important, they loved being able to understand so many “whys” in their lives.

It was much more difficult for Team Do-Well to learn how to transfer responsibility to their students. The challenge was uncomfortable because it forced team members to deal with the issue of power. It was by no means easy to distinguish between abdication of authority and the sharing of responsibility, and the teachers engaged in on-going reflection and discussion to help each other make the mind shift to partnership with students. As the project unfolded, they checked their progress through the use of journals, classroom surveys, student self-evaluations, and parent and teacher questionnaires. They began to see benefits in their new approach as facilitators of student learning. For example, students took a more active role in their own learning; they produced higher quality work; assignments were handed in on time; there were fewer “turned off” students in the middle years and high school; and teachers found themselves dealing with fewer discipline incidents.

Over the course of the project, the members of Team Do-Well learned a great deal about providing genuine choice to students and gained confidence in their students’ ability to work in partnership. In the end, they concluded that, yes, they were “more willing to implement the Adaptive Dimension because they had concrete evidence of its effectiveness when the

responsibility was shared”. As one high school teacher put it:

The adaptive dimension is not for ‘special needs’ learners – it is for everyone, including teachers. I understand that I can teach the students to use this adaptive dimension, This gives them power.

I think Team Do-Well has opened the door for teachers to feel more confident about the students making choices, allowing them more freedom to learn in ways that are helpful to each individual.

Learning to “Let Go”

One of my students looked over my carefully crafted suggestions and pronounced them all boring. He had a better idea of what he would like to do to demonstrate understanding. His proposal met the requirements and his quality of work was better than anything he had done before. When it came time to hand in the assignment, the student made an extra effort to locate me in the building.

That episode caused me to always offer the option of allowing students to propose their own project to demonstrate the specific criteria.

- Teacher-Researcher