

One Teacher's Quest to Teach for Learning and Understanding

William J. Smith

June 16, 2016

Ms. Kimberly Mikus, a kindergarten teacher at the St. Martin de Porres school in northern Oakland, guides her students to a deep and profound understanding of ideas. Still, she has been frustrated that other elementary grades have not consistently applied the learning principles she uses with her students. Her frustration is understandable. The application of more effective learning principles across the St. Martin de Porres school would, as in many schools, require major investments by teachers, administrators, school boards and parents in training and development of curricula coordinated across the school and with the community.

As her class is the first exposure to school for many of her students, she can do more on her own to shape the disposition and attitudes of her students toward school than teachers of higher grades - and she does. There are several indications that Ms. Mikus's teaching is successful. Her class of over 25 students is typically larger than the other grades at the school, suggesting that some parents enroll students in the school only for her kindergarten class. Also, she reports that one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching is adult alumni who occasionally stop back and thank her for providing one of their most memorable years of learning.

She motivates her students by applying the three components of learning for teaching identified by Darling-Hammond. (2003) These components include addressing learners individually, creating a nurturing environment and organizing important content to be engaging and accessible. One of her fondest hopes is that teachers and administrators would apply these components across the school, rather than just in individual classrooms.

The following three sections explore how Ms. Mikus applies each of these components in her classroom. The last section explores how I would adopt her practices to my kindergarten classroom.

Engaging, Accessible and Important Content Provided by a Montessori Curriculum - Learning for Understanding Component One

Ms. Mikus uses a Montessori curriculum that she brought with her from the Rising Star Montessori school in Alameda. Her descriptions of activities she facilitates to support learning of locomotion, body and space perception, and physical manipulation of objects are consistent with a curriculum based on Plane 1 of the Montessori program (Montessori 1969; Grazzini 1988). She also provides a language rich environment that allows interactive talking, listening, singing and playing, again typical of a Plane 1 curriculum.

The Montessori curriculum differs from a teacher-centered curriculum in several ways. Differences I observed in Ms. Mikus's classroom, or that she described, include a constructivist or "discovery" model of learning where students learn concepts by working with materials, rather than by direct instruction. She also provides her students with

- choices of activities from within a prescribed range of options,
- uninterrupted blocks of work time, including for their own projects,
- specialized Montessori educational materials, and
- freedom of movement within the classroom (AMI-USA undated; AMS undated)

Ms. Kimberly encourages the participation of both parents and students in implementing the classroom curriculum in several ways. She sets clear expectations for both regarding homework. Her [classroom webpage](#) (St. Martin de Porres 2016a) states that "all homework is given out on Monday (or first day of week) and due on the following Friday (or last day of the school week)" and asks parents to remind their child to bring their homework to school when it is due. She urges parents to read with their child for 20 minutes every day and to check on what their child is doing even if they use the homework help available after school.

Work Stations Facilitate Individual Learning - Learning for Understanding Component Two

The most notable features of Ms. Mikus's classroom are the multimedia workstations that students circulate between. During free time every afternoon, students are allowed to use a workstation of their choice. During more structured times, students work independently at various work stations while Ms. Mikus and an instructional aid circulate between them and provide individual coaching and encouragement. Students also help each other out at the workstations and learn to resolve conflicts over materials and equipment themselves.

The math, language, science, music, craft and seasonal workstations all use multimedia displays and emphasize hands-on activities. The math station includes posters with large text, pictures or drawings to illustrate mathematical operations, as well as objects for physically performing many of those operations. The language workstation contains many posters illustrating language words and concepts, for example cats and plurals, respectively. This workstation also features a greater variety of books and printed materials than the other workstations. The posters at the science workstation consist of text and pictures or drawings of physical objects or scientific concepts, frequently near realia. Ms. Mikus takes special pride in the craft workstation which provides modeling clay, hand tools and all variety of objects that promote the development of motor skills and space perception.

Ms. Mikus states on [her faculty webpage](#) (St. Martin de Porres 2016b) that she enjoys bringing her love for art, music, and dance into her classroom. Her interest in these disciplines is evident from the student art projects exhibited throughout the classroom and in the hallway, a classroom sound system, musical instruments and exhibits at the music workstation and a large open floor area that is suitable for dancing and calisthenics.

Other than one multimedia workstation that functions as a theatre with a large screen for direct or audio-visual instruction of the whole class, there is little personal computer technology in this kindergarten classroom. Students receive familiarization training using personal computers in a nearby technology classroom.

A Nurturing Environment - Applying Learning for Understanding Component Three

My occasional observations of Ms. Mikus kindergarten classroom over two year indicates that she has created a nurturing environment. Both my interview with her and her website provide clues as to how.

She identified patience as the most important trait needed for a teacher to create a nurturing environment. Patience both enables a teacher to better understand a student's concerns before taking action and provides more time for students to resolve problems on their own.

Ms. Mikus encourages parents to support her students in several ways. Besides encouraging parents to read to their child everyday and to monitor their homework, she provides them with a list of supplies they are expected to provide with a description of how to package the supplies. She keeps supplies in a common storage area, which encourages sharing between students, rather than in individual desks. On [her faculty webpage](#) (St. Martin de Porres 2016b) she encourages parents to help their child celebrate their birthday in several ways even if they cannot attend the celebration themselves.

Birthday Celebrations: Your child may celebrate their birthday at school. Please send in a simple treat, and a baby picture, along with one picture of each year of your child's life. Please feel welcome to attend this event! Please schedule the date and time with me before hand. **NO GOODIES BAGS WILL BE DISTRIBUTED IN THE CLASSROOM!** It is too tempting for them to sneak treats (and often those of others at school!)

Ms. Mikus encourages parents to attend, but strongly discourages them from sending in items commonly found at birthday parties, like goodie bags and toys, that create problems in classrooms. She encourages parents and students to share books with the class, but not toys. She provides links to three phonics websites on her classroom site ([Word Machine](#) undated; [Starfall](#) undated; [Phonic Fighter](#) undated) that may benefit not only the students, but also several of the parents who speak little English.

My Classroom for Engaging and Profound Learning

My classroom goal is the same as Ms. Mikus's, develop in my students a deep and profound understanding of ideas. Unlike Ms. Mikus who spent many years in the Montessori system developing her teaching skills in an environment that valued and supported deep learning, the only opportunity I have to work in such an environment may be my student teaching positions. I will likely rely on transferring my career experience to the classroom to accelerate the development of my deep learning classroom skills.

To avoid her frustration at implementing deep learning across her school, I hope to join a school that is committed to deep learning, for example many project based schools. As I plan to teach in schools that serve economically and otherwise disadvantaged communities, I may broaden my target schools to include those that are committed to incremental improvements in teaching methods with a long term goal of implementing deep learning. Eventually I expect most project-based schools, which today serve primarily affluent populations, to provide a better education at a lower cost than today's teacher-centered schools.

To support individuals with my teaching, I will adapt Ms. Mikus's workstation configuration to facilitate deep learning at my future school for students. I will strive to know each student and their families. To create a nurturing environment, I will seek to involve parents in assisting and monitoring students as she does. To organize content to be engaging and accessible, I will work closely, either officially or unofficially, with other teachers to develop curriculum tailored to our school that engage and are accessible to all students. My starting point to develop such curricula will be the upcoming instruction and curriculum courses in the USF Teacher Credentialing program supplemented with elements of curricula demonstrated to enable deep learning, such as Ms. Mikus's Montessori curriculum and the Waldorf curriculum (Taplin 2010).

References

1. Linda Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2003). Pulling It All Together: Creating Classrooms and Schools That Support Learning. In *The Learning Classroom: Theory Into Practice*. Detroit: Annenberg Media.
2. Maria Montessori (1969). The Four Planes of Development. *AMI Communications* (2/3): 4–10.
3. Camillo Grazzini (1988). The Four Planes of Development: A Constructive Rhythm of Life. *Montessori Today* 1 (1): 7–8.
4. Association Montessori Internationale-USA,(AMI-USA), undated. [AMI School Standards](#). Retrieved 2011-04-22.
5. American Montessori Society (AMS) undated. [Introduction to Montessori](#).
6. St. Martin de Porres School (2016a). [Kindergarten classroom webpage](#).
7. St. Martin de Porres School (2016b). Short biography of Kimberly Mikus on [her faculty webpage](#).
8. [Word Machine](#). A phonics game.
9. [Starfall](#), A phonics game.
10. [Phonic Fighter](#). A phonics game.
11. Jill Tina Taplin (2010). Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Education: Offering a Curriculum for the 21st Century. In Linda Miller, Linda Pound, *Theories and Approaches to Learning in the Early Years*. SAGE Publications. p. 92.