

Letters to the Editor

From Faking It to Making It: A PYP Reflection

By Shannon O'Dwyer

Dear Editor,

This is the story of my journey from PYP pretender to PYP educator.

Recently, I made the transition from an Australian independent school to an international IB

school. In preparation, I completed an online course, pored over exemplar units, and analyzed each element of my new curriculum. I read every word of *Making the PYP Happen*, dog-eared the Scope and Sequence documents, and plastered my walls with PYP language. From the outside, I probably looked like a PYP teacher.

I was not. I was faking it. It was all smoke and mirrors. You see, around October of my first year, I decided that I knew better. (This is not my finest hour as a lifelong learner!) I decided that the PYP was not a particularly unique or superior curriculum; it was just quality teaching wrapped in its own brand of terminology. I decid-



An O'Dwyer protégée (photo: BISS).

ways, my lessons were simply not facilitating deep understanding of the central idea. I finally let go of my arrogant ambivalence. I spent more hours reading, and gradually learned to use the curriculum as it was designed.

I began to view the language, not as jargon, but as a powerful framework for contextualizing and connecting learning across the disciplines. Concepts and skills (which I had previously dismissed as vague nomenclature) became the starting points of my lessons. I felt the magic.

Students began walking to the "attitudes wall" to choose words for biographical writing. Their initiative morphed into a grammar lesson about changing nouns to adjectives (curiosity to curious; creativity to creative). In a meaningful context, ESOL students explored noun suffixes and internalized patterns. On our class blog, students' deep connections now stun me every day.

With the PYP elements at the heart of my lessons, the students' transference and reflections are increasingly insightful. In the same sentence, an eight-year-old will explain "caring" in the context of environmental protection, interpersonal kindness, and self-esteem.

After an ice-breaker game, students will write about the attitudes, social skills, and communication skills of effective team members. To construct a "Happy Home" recipe, students instinctively discussed the similarities and differences between cultures.

No, these students are not gifted, nor are they native English speakers, nor am I a great teacher. (See the beginning of this article!) These are simply tales of children who have been given a powerful vocabulary for learning. The PYP language enables students to think about themselves and the world in deep, relevant, connected ways. Indeed, I believe some students use the PYP vocabulary as a schematic home-base, or mental lens, to interpret all new learning.

This has the effect of constantly strengthening and consolidating prior understanding, across all disciplines. For me, the magic was in the language. By giving up the pretense, I discovered that this curriculum is different. It provides a common vocabulary, which empowers minds and connects content.

And the bonus? I have even more time for those stand-alone place value lessons. ●

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