



## *My Frame of Reference - by Angela Jurgensen*

Imagine a classroom as a dinner table. Around it are young minds, growing and absorbing information. They are all hungry for knowledge, and eagerly await for what is going to be served. Suddenly, the platter arrives, and the cook reveals... boiled cabbage. That is all for today, and the next day, and the day after that. It won't take long for the children to start looking for other sorts of nourishment, and yes, it will generally be junk food. But what if instead of boiled cabbage, the cook brought a variety of delicious soups, every day a little different?

Like good soup, good teachers incorporate different ingredients to their lessons. They are aware of the differences in their students, and add a variety of flavours and textures to reach all types of learners. Every student is an individual, with unique backgrounds and needs; if some of them really hate carrots and want to leave those on the bowl, there will be still plenty in the soup to nourish them. To quote Maria Montessori, "***One test of the correctness of educational procedure is the happiness of the child***", and forcing them to eat what they hate is not the right path to happiness and fulfillment. Alternative assignments are always an option; what matters to me is the demonstration of learning, and the growth of every student.

At the same time, it is important to bring different subjects together as much as possible. My main teachable subjects are Science and Biology, Arts, Pottery, Information Technology and Textiles, which I usually mix together and season with music, History, creative writing and current events.

My love for variety started very early. I am originally from Brazil. My grandmother was an amazing cook, and made soup every day, picking only the freshest ingredients. Colours, flavours and textures were never repeated. I couldn't believe every one of those dishes were still soup.

My father, on the other hand, was a mathematics professor and a computer programmer; our routine was to go every Sunday to the bookstore, where we sat on the floor and read for hours. He tutored me in Math using his own visual and hands-on methods. Unbeknownst to him, he was also a soup teacher, and helped build the teacher I am today.

I started my undergraduate studies to become a dentist after high school. That path was too linear for me, and so I set off to the United States when I was 21, to study Arts and Illustration. I have travelled and lived in many other cities in the United States and Europe, before finally becoming a Canadian. I worked as a tailor for years, learning everything about different textile properties. I also started a children's book publishing house on my own: I edited, designed and illustrated books for children and teens, to feed my love for books.

I never stopped loving to learn. I bring my excitement about learning to my classroom, each and every day, and make true connections with my students. Positivity is contagious and enhances student engagement. Engaged does not, however, mean that the students take over the class. When at the table, everyone must mind their manners. Students are kept in the moment and under control. There is always enough to do: students who finish an exercise early are given extra activities. My creative lesson plans are peppered with little routines, to create a sense of order.

Assessments are fair and frequent. I am a huge proponent of formative assessment, and do it without thinking. I ask questions constantly, look over shoulders, play games, and also share double-entry journals with them almost daily, to ensure open communication between me and my students. This may be because of my grandmother, always fussing over us while we ate. Brazilian cooks need constant feedback, and food and love are closely interconnected. Frequently checking in has enabled me to know and understand my students better, and helped me gear my lessons towards a more nourishing soup. Does the student get to the core of the subject? Does he know how to use previous knowledge and integrate into the new knowledge that was given to him? Is she truly learning? Is the soup good?

When giving assignments, my expectations are clearly delineated. I give students every chance to succeed in my classroom. Everything the student does in my class matters. Pressure is removed from testing and quizzing, bringing the student's attention to the soup itself: the learning and the interaction in the classroom.

Parents and family are also a part of the soup, as their actions and interests greatly influence a student's behaviour and excitement. I keep an open channel of communication with them about their child's progress. I am invested in helping every student succeed academically as well as emotionally, and support from their families plays a big part on this. By the same token, a teacher cannot teach in a vacuum; reaching out for support, col-

laboration and ideas from other teachers and school counselors is the way to make the best soup. This is one of the instances where too many cooks do not spoil the pot.

As far as my Philosophy regarding education, I believe in Constructivism and Social Reconstructionism. As a Constructivist, I believe students have the capacity to be self-directed and motivated, creative and innovative. I believe in inquiry-based learning and allowing each student to develop their own conclusions. Knowledge happens when a student comes in contact with new information, and is able to add this to their own context, life experiences and prior knowledge, effectively digesting the material and assimilating it in their young minds.

As a Social Reconstructionist, I understand that the world has some serious issues, such as inequality, mismanagement of resources and environmental unbalance. The main objective for me as a teacher is to help my students become aware of these issues. We are all connected, every one of us, and all of us have talents; I want my students to learn what superpower they can develop in order to change the world for the better. As Social Reconstructionist Paulo Freire stated, "***the teacher is of course an artist, but being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves.***"

Education is the most important pillar of change, and we must help raise students who care, who are involved and who want to make a difference. Connecting with the students, giving the students a sense of meaning and purpose in life and teaching that there is more to it than simply working and growing old is crucial. There are so many ways we can help each other in the world, not only in big ways, but also - and equally important - helping in small ways. Guiding students to discover the unique ways they can improve and protect the world and the people around them is one of my highest goals.

Understanding the differences between each student is the key to successfully reaching every student. When you know your classroom, you can plan what ingredients should be added to the soup each and every day. Every student has the potential for greatness, in their own right, and in their own unique way; it is my job as a teacher to bring that greatness to light. I encourage them to learn from each other, to take risks, to make mistakes. I believe in using positive framing to correct student behavior, and enabling a sense of trust in order to build our relationship. I am naturally a positive person, and believe that everyone wants to do good; I help students by encouraging them to love and support each other, to understand their differences, and to appreciate each other's unique set of skills.

In my classroom, everyone participates. There is no opting out; I ensure that every one of the students is engaged from the very beginning, so that finally self-confidence and self-worth becomes a habit. They may be

unwilling to participate at first, but my goal is to create a loving environment where they are comfortable trying. I also ensure they learn important skills such as constructive note taking and how to do a proper search on the internet; in fact, I integrate technology as much as possible into my classroom, and help students understand that it is not only a toy or a way to connect with friends, but also one of their best allies.

The more I learn new things, the more I find yet more new things that spark my interest. The more I teach, and the more soup I make, the more possibilities I find to make knowledge more and more exciting. It seems like there is never the right mixture to finally achieve complete knowledge. The secret is that in reality there is no complete knowledge; as soon as you think you have tasted every soup, a new ingredient appears, and new recipes become magically available. All of us are born and learn; grow and learn; graduate and learn; work and learn; grow old and learn.

Learning is the meaning of life.

This is why I wanted to be a teacher; not only because I love teaching and guiding students, but because I also love learning. Teaching is one of the few professions where what you give is exactly what you get. It is a natural, symbiotic profession, and one with much responsibility.

A good teacher stays with you for life. I remember my old math teacher from Senior High, Mr. Darlan; he was very serious and a very strict, traditional lecturer. I did my best to ask him when I had any doubts, always offered to answer his questions, and did my best to get reasonable grades on his tests. Despite this, I didn't think he even noticed me or knew my name.

On the last week of class, I met him on the corridor, and he asked me if I was ready for the end of the year. I answered yes, and that I hoped I could get into college and do good things in the world. He looked at me, got very serious and said something that really stuck with me: "Angela, you can do anything you set your mind to." I didn't know what was more surprising... that he knew my name, or that he thought this highly of me. Either way, his words stayed with me until this day.

What we say, what we do, the faith we put in our students, or the lack of faith that we demonstrate, these things stick with them. If we don't believe in them, it will haunt them later in life, when they get a crummy job, and when they don't get promoted, and when things go south. The image and words of the teacher that obviously thought so little of them will come back, and they will think that the teacher was right.

I aim to be a teacher like Mr. Darlan; I give my students words that will hold them up when times are tough. When they get the crummy job, or when things go south, I want them to have something positive to think

about – I want for them to know that this is not all they can get, and that they can get anywhere, if that is what they really want. I want my students to know that I believe in them.

Every one of them has a young mind full of incredible possibilities. They all deserve hope and confidence, nurturing and a belief that if they work hard enough, they can accomplish anything.

If that is the only thing they get from my classes, then the soup was just right.

*Angela Jurgensen - Secondary Teacher, World Improver and Soup Lover*

