Beautiful Work

By Ron Berger, former teacher at Shutesbury Elementary School, now Chief Program Officer for Expeditionary Learning

I am a public school teacher with a vision of education very different from the vision we are hearing from politicians and from the media these days. What I value most in teaching is the opportunity to support students to do beautiful work. I use the term *beautiful work* broadly: with my students it applies as much to their original scientific research and math solutions as to the eloquence of their writing or the precision of their architectural drafting. Always, in all subjects, there is the quest in my classroom for beauty, for quality, and we critique all that we do for its level of care, craftsmanship and value.

This would hardly seem a controversial stance: being a champion of quality in education. Unless you took the notion of quality seriously, as I do. Unless you engaged students to pursue beautiful work with a passion, and found that taking the time for this pursuit is no longer considered appropriate in many schools. The new national focus on "standards" seems to be less about high standards than about covering required material, and there is little time left in most schools for the quest for real quality.

I believe that beautiful work in any field has an aesthetic core. My students and I often work with professionals — scientists, architects, historians, writers, artists — and all of them articulate a sense of beauty in work done well in their discipline. When these professionals critique student work in my classroom, their critique is always aesthetic, always a process of defining what elegant work in that discipline can be. My students and I make our aesthetic and artistic vision a foundation of our classroom culture; we discuss it just about every day.

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When guests to our classroom are curious about the origin of student excitement, dedication and care in work, I reply that it is no surprise. These students have a different mission than students in many schools. They are not here to fill in the blanks on worksheets: they are here to accomplish original, beautiful work. The classroom itself is a gallery: elegant work is displayed everywhere — on walls and on shelves — and students take pride in the beauty of the classroom.

The artistic nature of our classroom culture is not just metaphoric: the structures and strategies that support quality work in all disciplines come from a heritage of the arts. We bring almost all work through multiple drafts or rehearsals to refine and improve it. In this process of revision, we engage in formal and informal critique sessions, and

we also invite critique from "masters"— experts from outside the school. We post work publicly in draft form and in final form for public comment. Final draft work is completed not simply for our own eyes or for my eyes as the teacher, but for a broader public beyond the classroom and often beyond the school. Sometimes this sharing of work is through gallery exhibitions and other times through publications or projects for the community.

We use models of excellence to set the standards for our work — models from former students in our school or other schools, and models from the professional world. Just as in the world of arts, we encourage what we call in my classroom "tribute work": student projects that build from the ideas of former students and honor it through imitation and improvisation. What in many schools might be called "cheating" is considered wise practice in our classroom: studying great work to learn what we can borrow and what strategies we can learn.

Just last week my students sat down to work on a task that in many classrooms would take twenty minutes: thank-you letters. Each of my students had been paired with a local scientist, and had individually interviewed and worked alongside that scientist in his or her laboratory or field site in a day-long or multi-day internship. The internship and interview experience was for a book we will prepare to send to local schools, celebrating the work of local scientists.

Our thank-you letters were not quickly done. Each went through multiple drafts, with critique from me, as teacher, and from peers. Each student has learned italic calligraphy and each labored with a calligraphic pen to create a letter and envelope that would be visually stunning as well as thoughtfully composed; many included colored illustrations and decorative details. In their letters, students described the scientific endeavors in which they had been involved, so there was new discussion and revision of scientific writing. The letters took us most of the morning, and some students took them home for more work.

In today's educational climate, not too many teachers would feel comfortable dedicating this amount of class time to such a task, or even allowed to do so. I wonder: what could be more important than doing this job really well? Is there a more profound lesson than taking pride in creating work of importance and beauty for a real audience?

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