

WHOLE BRAIN TEACHING

A New Way of Life

by Liann Nutini

Whole Brain Teaching has changed my teaching style—dramatically. Often I imagine myself as a young, green teacher, and I am certain I would not even recognize my older self. My stress level is down, the enjoyment level is up and my students are learning more than ever. What is Whole Brain Teaching?

Whole Brain Teaching is one of the fastest growing, education reform movements in America. It rests upon the principle that teachers at every level share the same difficulties: students lack discipline, background knowledge and fundamental problem solving skills. From kindergarten to college, teachers face students who have difficulty with reading and writing. Nonetheless, our students respond to challenges, enjoy well-designed learning games, and can make, in the proper setting, astonishing educational progress. (Biffle, 2007)

I stumbled upon Whole Brain Teaching as I was searching for professional development and inspiration for my teaching. I had heard the term “brain gym” at a previous conference so I typed it into Google to see what I could find. Third or fourth on the list of hits were two Youtube videos that caught my eye. The first was Andrea Schindler teaching kindergarten using the Whole Brain Teaching method. I was mesmerized as I watched her kindergarten class focus and engage in every minute of the lesson. The transitions from carpet to desk work, from practice to review, were flawless. Ms. Schindler was in complete control. Moreover, she and her class were so happily intent on teaching and learning their lessons. I could see the joy and pride on their faces as her students taught the class and taught each other core behaviour and academic concepts. In a period of an hour, I watched the video over and over again. I even took my iPhone to bed with me so I could watch the video three more times. I was determined to create my own Whole Brain Teaching classroom.

Whole Brain Teaching isn't merely classroom management or a method of teaching concepts. It is both combined into one. It meets the needs of all Multiple

Intelligence learning styles, differentiated instruction, covers Bloom's Taxonomy, and keeps the classroom ticking like clockwork. Plus, and this is a big one, it requires students to take ownership of their learning and behaviour, by utilizing student leadership, student led teaching, and student/peer accountability.

There is a large amount of educational research which shows that students are more successful when they participate in student learning teams than when they study alone. Not only do weak students benefit by being taught by other students, but strong students gain increased subject mastery when they have the opportunity to instruct their peers. (Biffle, 2007)

Two aspects convinced me that Whole Brain Teaching was the teaching method for me: during classroom activity the whole brain is being stimulated—every concept, spoken direction and nuance of the classroom is mirrored, meaning each action has a gesture, a visual, and a verbal attachment. Hence, all areas of the brain are wholly stimulated.

A significant quantity of modern brain research demonstrates that we learn best by seeing, saying, hearing and doing. When we see information, we employ the visual cortex near the rear of the brain; when we say and hear information, the language centers, Broca's area and Wernicke's area in the brain's left hemisphere are active. When we engage in a physical learning activity we employ the motor cortex, our most reliable memory storage area, located in a band across the top, center of the brain. (Biffle & Vanderfin, 2009)

Secondly, not just your keen and knowledgeable students are sharing their delightful musings and new understandings—the entire class is meant to follow along with gestures and words, and then they must teach their neighbour. Oh yeah! Everyone is expected to participate and work hard to be a good teacher to one another.

As I continued to learn about Whole Brain Teaching with the guidance and support of the WBT staff through forum posts, email, blogging and live video conferences, critical thinking became a Whole Brain Teaching focus in accordance with the needs and desires of its teacher following. The founder, co-creator and college professor, Chris Biffle, brainstormed with his dedicated, talented, enthusiastic team (one of whom is Andrea Schindler) alongside teachers from all over the world to create Brain Toys used when teaching the class or your neighbour. These toys, Because Clappers, Example Poppers, to name two, help students practise key critical thinking thought processes in such a stimulating, cheap (they're free), and easy way that kindergarten to college students are begging to play with them. I was impressed with the fluidity, adaptability and creativity of my new found teaching friends and these innovative teaching methods. Every time I turned around the WBT staff had collaborated to come up with something new, exciting and practical to help teach core concepts or acceptable behaviour in the classroom. Whole Brain Teaching is meant for the uniqueness of every teacher and classroom.

Currently, I have been using Whole Brain Teaching in my grade one classroom for over a year and a half. In a short period of time, I have seen numerous improvements in all my students, both academically and behaviourally. Whole Brain Teaching has given my below average students the ability and the confidence to shine and many opportunities to share their knowledge orally, rather than always through written work. My gifted students have been challenged more than ever through critical thinking and lessons that allow for learning beyond grade level. My average students demonstrated talent and growth in all areas; many surprised me with their ability to lead the class or teach their neighbours. Also, my teaching has immensely improved—Whole Brain Teaching challenged me to look at how I relay concepts to my class and has provided a model for how to develop my delivery. Furthermore, I have tightened up my classroom management methods and provided sound logical backup plans to meet the needs of challenging behavioural situations. Last, I have been able to

learn from and help other teachers by sharing my own experiences, successes and quandaries.

Below is an excerpt from My Whole Brain Teaching Blog.

Super Speed 100 and More

Super Speed 100 was a hit this week with my class! Although it is the end of the year, I felt it was the appropriate time for this group and their skill level. I made sure that my seating arrangement consisted of one partner who was a little more advanced in reading than the other partner. Also, before we started, I had my students review the words for that level so that when it came time to begin they weren't scrambling or lost. As well, I had them decide who would start first. My students have stickers on their desks so sometimes I would say reds will start for the first round and purples would start for the second round. They really ate it up! Yum!!

Today, I had one of the grade 2 teachers come and observe my class in action! I was SO nervous! I divided my scoreboard so that it was girls vs. boys. The kids were amazing - students taught the class, they taught each other, they taught their sockless hand puppets, they compared and contrasted, and they played all the games. I even was able to deal with an issue between two children while my class was still running smoothly. Oh yeah!!! If only I had been video taping!!!!

It definitely hasn't been all rainbows and butterflies this week - spring fever is definitely in the air!)

As the year progressed, my students have demonstrated some interesting ways of speaking to one another. Some are very hard on others if things do not go their way. Often they are critical and sometimes they say things like, "If you don't do this for me, I won't be your friend!" After a particularly rough gym class I decided to skip computer time and head back to the classroom. I made a T-chart and we listed unkind things someone might say. We discussed how the person that is saying these things most often feels badly about themselves. One little boy offered this pearl of wisdom: You are what you say:) I had each student have their sockless hand puppet say mean things to the other sockless hand puppet. I asked them how their sockless hand puppet felt. Next, we made a list of kind things to say to the person rather than becoming defensive - I reinforced that if that person is saying these things they must be feeling badly - what can we say to make them feel better? I had them practise again with their sockless hand puppets. Finally, I challenged my class to compliment 5 different people a day for the rest of the year. We

brainstormed and practised good compliments. To facilitate this, every so often for the rest of the day I would say, "Compliment!" and everyone would compliment one another. I am going to try to keep this up with the objective being to create a more positive, supportive environment!

For more stories of my experiences in the classroom check out my blog at mywholebrainteachingblog.blogspot.com

If you would like to learn more about this dynamic new teaching lifestyle that is Whole Brain Teaching, please visit www.wholebrainteaching.com or contact me at lnutini@stjosephkelowna.bc.ca

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