

The Co-op Co-op!

Janet Griffith, Assistant Superintendent, Alberta Conference, Red Deer, AB

When did **you** go to school? Was it in the 80's, 70's, 60's, 50's, 40's, or 30's? What did you enjoy? What was difficult? What did teachers do? Did the days ever seem long? It really doesn't matter much which decade your education experience happened. Chances are you heard statements like: "Be quiet." "Pay attention to the teacher." "Give the right answer." "Don't share your work with others, that's cheating." "Don't talk to your neighbour." You probably also heard teachers say: "This is our classroom"—but decisions were made by the teacher. "Everyone is special"—but culture and ethnicity were ignored. "Creativity is important"—but the approach was already defined.



How many of us educators are guilty of saying the things listed above to students we've had in our classrooms? Come on now be honest! I know I'm guilty. The message we are or were giving children has been that the teacher gives out the information, students listen and speak only when called on, some people are smart and valued, and some people just can't learn. But most of all, people have to compete to be recognized, to have status and get rewards. This pattern is a result of the Industrial Age.

However, may I be so bold to suggest, to quote Edward Fiske, "Schools clinging to this mode for learning are using a 19th century model to prepare kids for a 21st century world." So what do we do?

Jeanne Gibbs, in her book *Tribes; A New way of Learning and Being Together*, suggests a new pattern of interaction and structure that is beginning to emerge in education. This new pattern changes the role of the teacher in a dramatic way. Teachers will see themselves as learners, facilitators, researchers, and designers of curricula. When teachers work in collegial groups, their inherent isolation from each other disappears. No matter what the group approach may be called—cooperative learning, authentic instruction, active learning, jigsaw, group investigation, co-op co-op, or Tribes Learning Community—the benefits of cooperative instruction are documented. Students become motivated when they are able to work with peers, even the slow learners.

The Alberta Conference Teachers just experienced a 24-hour training session in Tribes Learning Community so aptly facilitated by the Durham District School Board Tribes Trainers. So what is Tribes you ask? Jeanne Gibbs in her book *Tribes* defines it this way: "Tribes is a democratic group process, not just a curriculum or set of cooperative activities. The outcome of the Tribes process is to develop a positive environment that promotes human growth and learning." Community is accomplished through three stages of group development using four agreements among the students or adults with whom you are working: Attentive listening, Appreciated/no put-downs, the right to pass, and Mutual respect. Tribes not only establish a caring environment for cooperative learning but provide structure for positive interaction and continuity for working groups whether in the classroom, the faculty, the administration or the parent community.

The Alberta teachers left with their teacher's bag full of strategies that can be used in the classroom, staff meetings, or even at home. Some of the comments we've been getting since the training, include: "I have to remind myself that I'm teaching, I'm having so much fun!" "The kids don't even realize they are learning, they are having so much fun!" "I am actually getting paid to have fun learning with the kids!" "This is the only way to go in multi-grade classrooms."

A local K-4 teacher reflects: Tribes has been an overall good experience in my classroom. I had a fun week. After the training, I went back to school and completely changed my whole thinking and the way I presented lessons to the students.

First of all, we took a good part of the morning and concentrated on the four agreements. Mutual respect didn't come easy for a lot of students, so we spent the week really concentrating on respect. I had a parent come to me and say that respect was one of the things that they were working with at home also. They were happy to hear that it was the main focus at school for the week.

Community circle has been a great experience. Every morning I have a sentence that they need to complete. Even though they have the right to pass, nobody has used it yet. I did have to ask one student to sit out of the community circle because of misbehavior. We continued our discussion in the community circle. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the student waving his hand in the air wanting to participate in the discussion. I asked him if he was willing to honor the agreements. He said that he was, so he was allowed back into community circle.

I am finding that reflection is a wonderful time. I pass a ball around, when they have the ball that's when they can talk. At first reflection didn't come easy to some students, but it is getting better.

We did the Spider Web, where we sat in a circle and rolled a ball of yarn to a person. Students had to say a name and one interesting thing about themselves and then roll the yarn to another student. When everyone finished, we had a spider web. Then the student had to remember who they rolled it to and they rolled back to that person to wind up the yarn. Challenging to some, but it worked out!

When introducing spiders, I read to them from a book. I would read a couple of pages and put the information that they told me on a big spider that I had drawn before class. After completing the book they had to get in their groups and draw a life map of the spider and then present it to the whole class.

We did the poem "I Know an Old Woman Who Swallowed a Fly". After reading the poem, we discussed it and they went to their groups and had to illustrate the poem. It is amazing what each group came up with. No group had the same picture. They all had a different understanding and interpretation of the poem.

I had to deal with "Conflict Resolution" this week. Two boys were play-fighting. I sat both boys down and asked them what the rules were. I just sat there and waited for them to come up with the answer. They said that they are not supposed to touch each other. So I repeated back to them what they said. I then asked what they were going to do about the situation. They looked at me; I just sat back and didn't say a word. Finally they came up with a solution. I repeated back the solution to them; they both agreed to the solution then I said good boys have a great day and walked away from them. I felt good about the whole situation and there was no stress! The students had to solve their own problem within the context of the community agreements.

In French, we are learning the days of the week. So we did the three-ball toss. The person throwing the ball had to say a day in French and the person catching the ball had to say the next day in French. Today we learned the words "stop" and "go" in French. To get this concept we played *Alligator Attack*. Not only did they learn two new French words but how to work together as a group.

Today, we are concentrating on Appreciations and No Put Downs. Students got in their groups and they had to talk about what Appreciations and No Put Downs meant to each of them. Then the groups made a poster to represent Appreciations and No Put Downs to be presented to the entire class.

I am finding that the more reflections we do and the more community circles we do, the more meaningful discussions we are having. Today, one of the boys in the class who is very shy actually joined in during reflection time.

One younger student came up to me today and said, "Mrs. __. I love school because we get to draw a lot." They are still giving me (the teacher) information. It's just in a different form than a worksheet.

Some of the best journeys begin with a vision, a knapsack, and some friends. So let's grab a few friends, our supplies, and begin on a journey that will meet students in a new way in the 21st century.

For more information check out www.tribes.com

Resources:

- Gibbs, Jeanne. (2001) *Tribes: a new way of learning and being together*. Windsor, California. Center Source Systems.