

Off the Wall

By Gary Thomas

It starts with a blank wall in the classroom. I have a feeling of trepidation and a touch of uncertainty. For the students at this stage there is little or no awareness of what is about to happen. The students look at the wall and wonder what it is for. Others walk past without even a cursory glance. Again I think, well here goes. This will be a learning curve for the students and for me. It is now a time of sink or swim but if I'm asking my students to be risk-takers and open minded, then I too have to be a risk-taker and open-minded and try something new with a new class.

As an undergraduate learning about becoming a primary school teacher, our lecturers mentioned the idea of displays but this always seemed to be of finished ideas or of learning. Looking into other classrooms, I would be amazed at all the displays at the beginning of the school year. I also wondered if some of these displays would change throughout the year and where was the room for students' learning. My classroom went for the minimalist approach and I would explain that I was waiting to display my students' learning. The minimalist approach included displays commonly found in primary classrooms; students' birthday poster, days of the week and months of the year. Some literacy or mathematics posters and a variety of thinking routines were also displayed.

Some Background

Fifteen years of teaching experience and some change was sought after. In Ron Ritchhart's book *Intellectual Character* he writes a piece telling of a teacher who set up their classroom in a particular manner with some quotes. I decided to take this on board. This year I placed five small posters on the windows of my room looking out so that people who entered my classroom would be able to read them. These posters were for students, parents and visitors to know that thinking was valued when they entered the classroom. By strategically placing the posters on the window near the entry, I was making public and very visible the culture of learning that I wanted to take place. The expectation that I valued thinking and questions needed to be clear to all who passed by. I wanted the students to know that I expected them to think and through thinking, learning occurs.

Below are the quotes I used.

- Ask questions and seek answers (Gary Thomas)
- The beautiful thing about learning is that no one can take it away from you (B.B. King). Graduate School of Education, George Mason University <http://gse.gmu.edu/quotes/>
- I am still learning (Michelangelo). Michelangelo quotes <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/m/michelangelo.html>
- All the world is a laboratory to the inquiring mind (Martin H Fischer). <http://www.quotegarden.com/learning.html>
- Learning is a treasure that will follow its owner everywhere (Chinese Proverb). <http://www.quotegarden.com/learning.html>

These quotes spoke to me of what I valued and I hoped the students would value as well.

I re-read an old piece of writing I had completed in 2005 when I was beginning to grapple with the thinking dispositions (Ritchhart, 2002) and creating a culture of thinking in the classroom. Some of the lyrics from *The Great Leap Forward* by English singer Billy Bragg seemed to speak straight to me; they got me thinking about my teaching.

You can be active with the activists or sleep in with the sleepers.

In a perfect world we'd all sing in tune but this is reality so give me some room.

So join the struggle while you may, the revolution is just a t-shirt away.

(Billy Bragg, The Great Leap Forward, Workers Playtime, 1987)

I wanted my students to be active as learners. To ask questions, to be open-minded and to be truth seekers when sifting through information. For the students many scenarios can be placed in front of them so they become active and intent on not just discovering the surface information but also becoming skeptical to follow up on the knowledge and understandings. For many students developing the disposition of skepticism is healthy when being a truth seeker. It is important for students not to just accept the information they find without cross-referencing for truth. For my students this will be the great leap forward.

The students' learning was being displayed using a variety of thinking routines. These were fantastic as discussion points and illustrate the students' thinking. A

majority of the displays were an end result. But I wanted something that could evolve, be active and added to, but wasn't quite sure how to go about it. This was my struggle.

In June 2011, after attending a Professional Development on literacy I walked out with at least one new idea that I was eager to put into practice straight away. I covered a wall with paper.



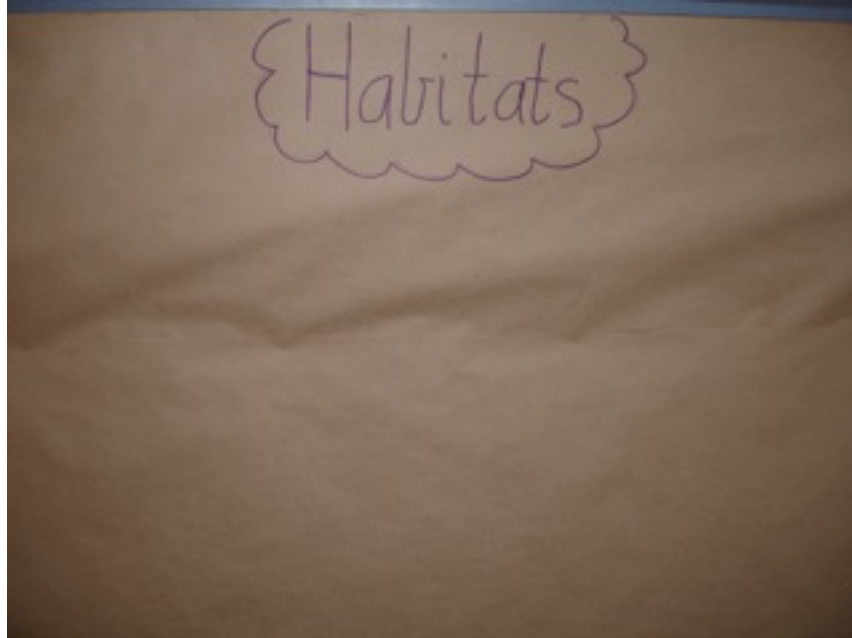
The revolution had just begun. The students wrote on the wall questions or wonders they had. The students wrote any learning to do with the topic. They wrote answers to other students' questions. Time was built into the literacy and inquiry periods for students to add to the wall. The students were engaged. I think even after 6 months they still couldn't believe they were writing with a texta on the wall (on paper of course).

Year 2 2012

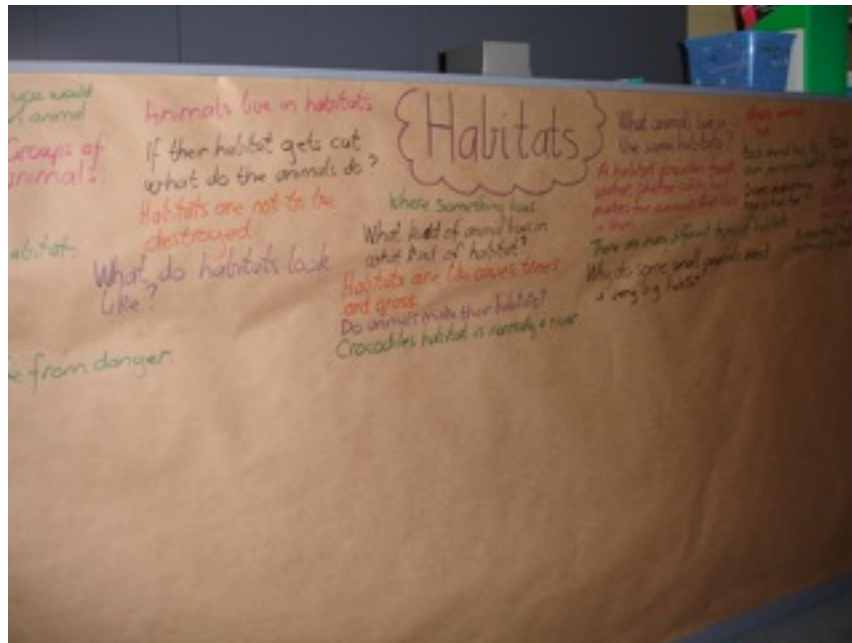
Fast-forward six months to a new school year and a new cohort. A new wall has been created in readiness for our unit. And this is where the trepidation and uncertainty creeps into my mind. You can't help comparing one class to another from year to year. My doubts rise mainly from: will the students embrace the wall? Will they use the wall in an open-minded, skeptical way? Will the wall assist them to be truth seekers? Will they use it to think metacognitively? Will the

students be mature enough to use the wall? This last question is the big one, as I will be starting the wall 6 months earlier with this year level.

The Starting Point



A new unit of learning is often started with a Think Puzzle Explore thinking routine (http://pzweb.harvard.edu/vt/VisibleThinking_html_files/VisibleThinking1.html) This gives me an opportunity to find out very quickly what the students know individually and also collectively. When delving into the minds of 6-8 year olds I am always surprised by some of the thinking they display and the destinations it can take us. The questions are also an interesting starting place. At the beginning of the unit we might get questions such as; Who invented a habitat? What is a habitat? Once the students have completed their Think Puzzle Explore, I collect them, have a quick look and then we go on with the rest of the lesson.



When the students come into the classroom the next day, they walk past the Graffiti Wall and see some writing on it. Already a buzz is filling the room. "That one is mine", "I wrote that", "Hey I wrote that as well". I bring the class down to sit in front of the wall.

"Okay guys, let's have look at our wall. I took your Think Puzzle Explore ideas and wrote them up on the wall. These are your ideas. As you can see we have a couple of things do to with learning but I think it is safe to say we certainly don't have all the answers yet". At this stage there is only about 6 to 8 ideas written on the board.

"I wrote up some of the questions / puzzles that you also have thought about. If more than one person had the same question, I only wrote it on the board once. Let's read these questions and see where they might take us".

Here are some of the responses to the unit on habitats.

Think

- I think a habitat is a place where animals live like a crocodiles habitat is normally a river and monkeys habitat is normally a tree. There are lots and lots of habitats in the world.
- Sometimes learning is hard and sometimes it is easy.

- Habitats are for animals to live. Habitats are to keep animals safe from danger. Habitats are like homes for us.
- There are many different types of habitats.
- They sleep and eat in their habitat. Like owls live in trees and branches.
- Habitats are all kinds of animals and a group of animals.
- Habitats are not to be destroyed because animals live in them.
- A habitat is where something lives.
- I think habitats are homes, caves and countries.
- A habitat provides food, water, shelter, safety and mates for the animals that live in them. Each habitat is different.
- You can explore a habitat by going to an animal's habitat or home like a beavers habitat is a dam, a spiders habitat is a web, the fish has the sea and a seagull the beach.
- Where animals live.
- Snakes would be in the reptile group. Every animal in the world has a habitat.

Puzzle

- Why do some small animals need a very big habitat?
- How many habitats are there in the world?
- Where are habitats built?
- Do animals make their habitats?
- Does every animal need a habitat?
- Is there a shark habitat?
- What do habitats look like?
- Where are snakes habitats?
- What kind of animals lives in what kind of habitat?
- Why is it called a habitat?
- Do some different animals have habitats that are basically the same?
- What do you need to make a habitat?
- What animals live in the same habitat?

It is the perfect opportunity to have a class discussion about what is written on the wall. For example, "Habitats are like home for us"? Seems to be a perfect question to ask at the beginning of the unit. As the students and I were having

the discussion I took down some notes of what they said. The following is some of the responses during the discussion:

- Humans have homes and that is like their habitat.
- Humans have habitats.
- Humans call them different things.
- Man made habitats.
- A cage for a bird.
- A canal.
- A house.
- A town or city.
- A hotel or school.

Teacher – Why do some small animals have / need a big habitat?

- Ants need big underground because there is so much of them.
- Need room for their food.
- For running around.
- Different hiding places so predators don't find them.
- Lay eggs so need room for them.
- Other animals won't find them.

Teacher – What are some types of habitats?

- Artic / Antarctica, snowy places.
- Deserts.
- Oceans
- River flowing.
- Drains are man made.
- Coral reef
- Rocks.
- Beach

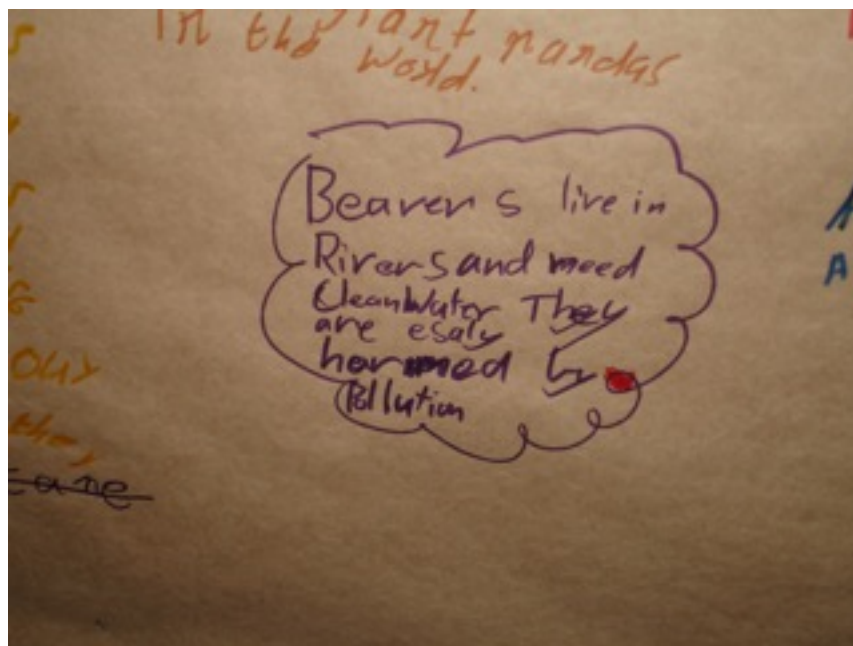
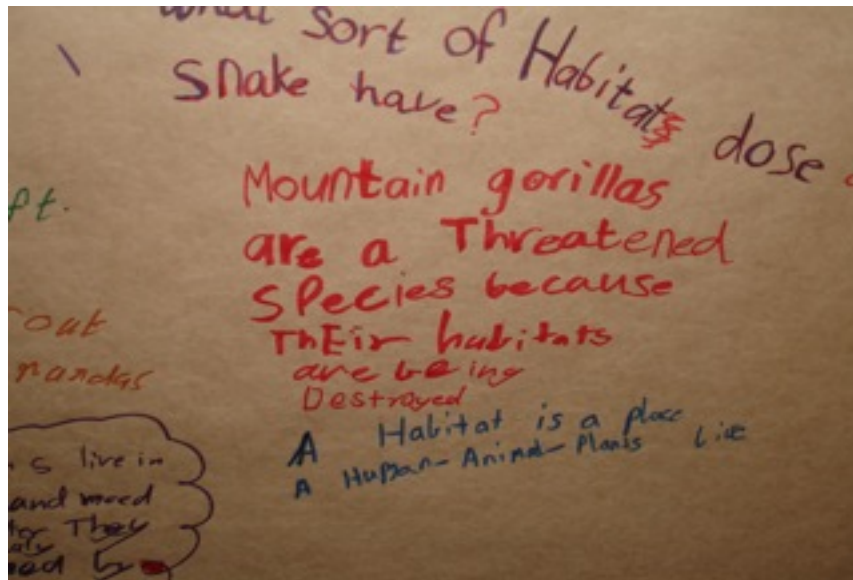
Now it is time to give the students the opportunity to begin to write on the wall. The students are engaged but now it is time for the interesting part. My directive to the students about the wall is that we want it to become an opportunity for us as a class to add our learning about the topic or if we have a question to pose the question on the board. As part of our literacy and inquiry block, students complete *Reading for Graffiti* where they read books, articles or web information and if they think they have learnt something new, or believe it is of

value, then they add it to the wall. I have also said that through conversations they might have had with their parents or peers, if again they have learnt something then they can add it to the wall. The wall has both puzzles / questions and what we know or learnt all written on the wall. The questions and learning would all be in one space. The puzzles are important as it continues to give the class the opportunity to ask questions through the unit and not just at the start.



So what was I uncertain of? My main fear was that after a week the wall stays the same with only the original puzzles and thoughts on it; that it will look bare and ordinary. A bare wall was the last thing I had to worry about. Within one session new ideas and questions were written on the wall. Within the week the wall was looking full already.

Once a week as a class we gather in front of the wall and read the learning that is written there. It is a great opportunity to come together as a group to read, discuss and formulate some answers or pose more questions. Often I hear: "I was thinking of that question too" or "Wow, good question". We read the section on what we have learnt. This is a great exercise. The students realize that the display is one that is being used and not just for show. There are spelling mistakes and grammatical errors. Some of the information is repeated on the wall. Some of the information is not in their own words. Am I worried about this? Not one bit. We are having a conversation. I can see - and my students can see - that they are learning and gaining a greater understanding.



The wall has been a great success all year - a fantastic vehicle for class discussions but also for students to have their own conversations with each other during literacy and inquiry sessions. The wall also assisted students when they were forming questions and gathering ideas for their personal inquiry into their chosen habitat.

Students completed the Thinking Routine I used to think...Now I think... about habitats and to see what they have learnt during the unit. They could use information found on the wall if they wanted. Outlined below are some of the responses.

Now I think...

- A habitat is a place where all living things live.
- Habitats have lots of different weather.
- Lots of homes.
- Food is very important.
- A habitat is like a giant house with lots of different animals.
- Pray mantis can hide in lots of spots.
- You can't move animals to different habitats because they won't adapt, like if you move a camel to the North Pole.
- From my research I now know that it is cool at night in the desert.
- Now I know that habitats have water, food, shelter and space.
- Humans have habitats.
- At Midday it is very very hot in the desert.
- Camels store fat in their hump. Camels can have two humps.
- There are heaps of different habitats in the world.
- That there are lots of habitats and not just every animal lives in one big habitat.

A New Idea

The idea of the learning wall for the inquiry unit has led me to begin a new learning space in the room - to create a learning wall for mathematics. I found a place students could access easily and put up the paper. I gave the same explanation about adding any mathematics learning to the wall.

After a week the wall was bare. Once again I gave the spiel and a gentle reminder that during a mathematics lesson or before school if you felt some learning had occurred then add it to the wall.

After another week the wall was bare and nothing had been added. It stretched out to three weeks with a bare wall, while the inquiry wall continued to be added to.

It had occurred to me that the structure of the *Reading for Graffiti* I had discussed earlier had been a vehicle for students to begin to add their questions and learning to the inquiry wall. The students were not given the same structure during a mathematics lesson. A discussion with two teachers from other schools about the mathematics wall led me to use two routines from the visible thinking website. "Thinking routines operate as a tool for promoting thinking. Just like any

tool, it is important to choose the right tool for the job" (Ritchhart, Church & Morrison, 2011, p. 45). The first routine used was Chalk Talk (Ritchhart, Church & Morrison, 2011). Chalk Talk involves the students to silently respond to the idea written on the paper. I wrote multiplication, division and fractions separately on large pieces of paper. The students each had a pencil and they were asked to respond to what was written on the paper. The students could also respond to other students' ideas. This was the first time as a class we had completed this routine and the students did really well. Once the Chalk Talk was finished I placed each on the mathematics wall and as a class we had a discussion on what was written. The second routine I decided to use was Headlines (Ritchhart, Church & Morrison, 2011). The students were used to this routine during inquiry classes but it was the first time the routine was used in mathematics. This routine asks the students to capture the most important part or aspect of the topic. The students were given the choice of writing a headline for multiplication, division, fractions or volume. These were all topics we had just completed. The headlines were displayed on the mathematics wall and a discussion was had. This gave the class and myself the opportunity to explore what had been written.

This approach with the mathematics seems to have worked really well. The discussion with the class as a follow up activity gets the class thinking about how different people express the same idea. Over the next couple of days I make sure I keep referring back to the wall, just to keep the idea of the wall in their thoughts. Already I am thinking of our next chalk and talk and headlines so we can add this to the wall.



As the year continues to tick by, I am constantly reviewing the use of the wall, the set up and how can it be used to enhance the learning of the students. We will have to wait and see if this is the way to go. As Billy Bragg said earlier, *in a perfect world we'd all sing in tune but this reality so give me some room*. So I will continue to reflect on my teaching and learning so that I can enhance the learning of the students in my classroom. Again as Billy Bragg sings, *so join the struggle while you may, the revolution is just a t-shirt away*.

References

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