



November 5, 2021: Feedback Leads to Learning

Dear CDS Community,

This summer, Chris Wachsmith got me hooked on the show [*The Great Pottery Throw Down*](#). I've binge-watched four seasons over the last couple of months. On weekends, while writing emails or cleaning my kitchen, I started to connect to the potters who ranged in age from Kit, a 19-year-old student, to Leonard and Peter, who each joined the show at age 70 after careers in business and teaching. The potters were as different as any group of people one might bring together randomly, and yet their passion for pottery brought them to the show.

The structure for each episode includes the Main Make Challenge, a Spot Test, and the Throw Down. The main challenges ranged from nesting bowls to entire sets of crockery to things like a toast rack and chicken brick. My favorite segment is the spot test, in which the expert judge, Keith Brymer Jones, does a quick demo and then the potters uncover a table with the materials needed to do their own version of the task. It looks so easy when the master potter demonstrates and it's quickly obvious that what is easy is actually a learned skill, practiced many times.

The contestants have a strict time limit and have to produce quickly and accurately. At the end of the timing, they might have to throw as many port chalices or egg cups as they can in the time limit. The stress is obvious and the mistakes are sometimes dramatic. At the end, the judges walk along and give very specific and pointed feedback, sometimes smashing a lovingly-produced item into a mash of clay or dumping something into a trash bucket. Feedback might include "we can see that it is slightly off-center, full of character" or "this is a wonderful effort, the rim is really generous." Each potter and expert or guest judge brings such passion and joy to the art, and the opportunity to see each of the contestants grow over the season is a lovely example of authentic learning and reflection. Sometimes Keith will approach a potter, pause, and be brought to tears by the work produced. He is always quick to notice growth and I felt a kinship when he would be moved to tears, unable to speak as he reflects on the growth of the individual potter.

I frequently am moved to tears at CDS when talking to students or observing their learning. This cycle of authentic learning is what happens in our classrooms each day as the teachers set up students to be just in the right space to learn and grow, building on previous knowledge and then stretching them toward new “ahas.” The educators then offer the kind of feedback that Keith gives: words of encouragement, specific suggestions to improve thinking, or nudges to look toward another direction when problem-solving.

This month, family conferences offer opportunities for you and your child to reflect on learning at this moment in time. You see the work your child has done and there are opportunities for the teacher and often the student to reflect on the process of learning. For me, these are beautiful manifestations of one of our learning beliefs: *We believe that assessment should be embedded in the learning process and is most meaningful when it incorporates reflection, feedback, and revision.*

Did you even know you needed a chicken brick or a toast rack?

Warmly,
Shelly