

Special Edition

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Free of Charge

Special News About Special People

Preschool

My own interest in the life and work of Leonardo da Vinci didn't fully take hold until I was 15. Before that, while aware of his genius and his contributions to the world of art, I had not been exposed to the full range of expression his intellect had found. While I forget the source, it was an article I came across in 1974 that centered on a controversy over whether a then recently “discovered” drawing of a bicycle among Leonardo da Vinci's codices was a hoax. While my born skepticism drew me into the arguments being forwarded on both sides of the dispute, my discovery of Leonardo da Vinci as a problem-solver and inventor sparked my request for copies of his notebooks as my birthday present that year. I pored over them for years, especially drawn to his sketches of novel mechanisms. I have little doubt that at some level I was missing the opportunities for invention that SRV's Shop program had regularly given me and my public school's Industrial Arts classes seemed designed to limit.

It was not until writing that last passage that I recognized in my own pedestrian efforts in Shop pale shadows of Leonardo da Vinci's inventiveness, approach to problem-solving and habit of sketching out ideas. It was about a decade ago, though, that I came across a book review that allowed me to see parallels between Leonardo da Vinci's and John Dewey's approach to education. In the book *How To Think Like Leonardo: Seven Steps to Genius*, Michael J. Gelb outlined what he called the “Seven Principles” that he saw underscoring Leonardo da Vinci's approach to the world:

Curiosità

An insatiably curious approach to life and an unrelenting quest for continuous learning

Dimostrazione

A commitment to test knowledge through experience, persistence, and a willingness to learn from mistakes

Sensazione

The continual refinement of the senses, especially sight, as the means to enliven experience

Sfumato

Literally meaning “Going up in Smoke”; a willingness to embrace ambiguity, paradox, and uncertainty

Arte/Scienza

The development of the balance between science and art, logic and imagination; also known as “Whole-brain” thinking

Corporalita

The cultivation of grace, ambidexterity, fitness, and poise

Connessione

A recognition of and appreciation for the interconnectedness of all things and phenomena; also known as systems thinking

How often when we are reaching forward are we also reaching back...

Shop

With several months of work with the basic tools under their collective belts, your preschoolers have shown many of Leonardo's traits themselves; curiosity, imagination teamed with logic, building and testing knowledge and new found persistence as they learn from mistakes in their weekly forays into woodworking. . As a hurried pace of life has more and more adults choosing expedience over experience for their children (Velcro over shoelaces, for example), Leonardo's commitment to direct experience and the learning that takes place as a result of mistakes is on regular display in the shop.

While the shop's assortment of tools holds the potential for some direct experiences that we eliminate with a consistent focus on safety, there are others that are both predictable and welcomed. When a child tries to lift her small two-piece project from the worktable and finds it won't budge is a much riper time to help her examine the cause, effect and importance of proper nail selection than before she is allowed to start building. The lesson is personal, meaningful and relevant to her direct experience and she is intrinsically motivated to understand the underlying reason. Nails bend, wood splits, pieces of wood put in the saving drawer without names on them are hard to identify the following week. Allowing the momentary frustrations provides the impetus to learn and, just as importantly, provides children with the necessary opportunities to develop their emotional and intellectual resiliency. The ability to solve problems takes both.

Pete, your children's classroom teachers, and I have the good fortune of being able to learn side by side with your children as they continually discover new ways to challenge our manual and creative skills as we facilitate and assist their efforts. As such, we're modeling the same processes of trying out new ideas that don't all work, of taking unenbarrassed ownership of our mistakes, and of meeting unexpected setbacks with renewed efforts. We're no Leonardo da Vincis, but I can imagine him looking favorably upon our work to fan the flames of inventive problem solving in your children.

In Molly's and Robin's Group, Eva has recently sought to wed traffic control with amusement park attractions in the form of a "helicopter ride;" Flynn may be soon be calling Guinness (think book not beer) to verify the airspeed of his "jet that flies really fast;" and Kaya has apparently deemed my bones picked clean by this group's weekly outpouring of "sharks" and has just turned her woodworking efforts to the building of a "bed."

Libby has been packing on muscle by "pumping iron" in the form of a 16 oz. hammer in the creation of a conceptual installation titled, "The wind that blows my house;" if Margaret played it any closer to the vest her cards would be behind her as she often chirps, "nothing" when I ask her what she'd like to tell me about her work with tools and wood; and it seems that McHale has reached the same conclusion Kaya has about my remaining nutritive value for "sharks" and has identified his latest construction as a "jet."

I am happy to report that Nathan too has turned away from making representations of the order Carcharhiniformes and has just built a "flying boat that can go under the sand" (a vessel that would have afforded me some protection from the months of shark attacks!). Meanwhile Noah nailed two pieces of wood together to depict a "man with a watch" and Ophelia can claim a rendering of a "ramp at my Nana's house" among her latest creations. (From the ramp's angle I take it Nana's outfitted her assisted mobility device with rocket boosters...)

Rhys continues to tease creative nuance from her small assemblages of wood, last week building a "silly bridge with a hat;" Sofia has not only *continued* her shark production but has recently expanded to hybrids with a "Shamu dolphin;" and Sylvie has turned from a run of "castles" to nail together a "house on a bridge."

Talia had great fun demonstrating the comedic potential inherent in her recent "fall off chair;" Theo broke free from the potential rut of successive weeks of building "race cars" by constructing a "super race car" (Do you see what he did there? Subtle, yet substantive); and Uma followed up a period spent putting together a "cake" with some invested work practicing with a file, (The jokes practically write themselves...)

In Maureen's and Jessica's Group, Anand sparked a wave of small box making and might well have put Shop's limited budget in jeopardy by inspiring a classmate to follow him into his current undertaking, the building of a bookcase. Aryav got caught up in a second theme currently being pursued in the group and is currently confronting the reality that sanding small wheels for a model car requires more than a few minutes of effort. Avery, having faced that same truth that work avoided simply runs ahead and waits for you when she needed to prepare wheels for the "bike for dolls" she

designed, but finished the job quickly once she set her mind to getting it done.

Ben built a box before, less alliteratively, turning his attentions to the construction of a "helicopter;" Calvin followed his box up with a "snow blower" and is currently starting a "boat" purportedly inspired by a Leonardo da Vinci drawing; and Charlie is bringing solid independent effort to an ever growing "burrito maker." (How did Leonardo not see *that* as a valuable undertaking?)

Chloe has recently traced a path from fantasy to reality by building a "unicorn" followed by a "chameleon" and last week "my sister, Sage." Claire's sense of humor spawned a diminutive "Polly Pocket umbrella" (the comedic value found in her getting me to try to take shelter under it), and Ella liked her introduction to the use of a combination wrench enough to build a "motorboat" principally to get the chance to use the tool to drive a long lag screw through thick pieces of wood.

Since getting in on the box building action, Everett has been busy crafting a "boat" and a "rocket ship;" Julia's "Hawaiian airplane that takes you to Hawaii" came fresh on the heels of her carefully constructed "killer whale;" and, perplexing to this author, Luis has continued to build new projects each week despite finishing one that could "do whatever I want it to."

Like the other box builders, Matt took a turn at the miter saw to cut out the project's pieces before gluing them together and took the extra step, as did Ella, of adding a form fitting lid. Max has now made enough "Darth Vader ships" that last week I suggested that perhaps "Betty Vader" might like one as well (the child was surprisingly unswayed by the goofy theme music I provided to sell the idea); and, having just finished a small model car, Michael has been caught up in the undertow of box building having bobbed over the group's original wave of interest in the cube shaped projects.

Savannah made it clear that pre-sanded wheels would have been more to her liking when she started working on her model car. When I dramatically feigned the belief that I should probably give her wheels to someone older, she proved me wrong in a hurry and has since gone on to start another car. Savannah, the original car enthusiast, is currently following Anand into furniture construction in the form of a bookcase of her own and Sophie appears to have taken some recently aired public service announcements to heart as she identified her most recent constructions as a "sanitizer" and "soap."

Until next time,

Mike