Work or Learning?

While observing in classrooms in several schools these past few weeks, I was re-engaged in the examination of the language teachers and students use when describing the tasks in which students are engaged. It is often described as the "work" that students are to do. I'm wondering how that concept interferes with students' focus on learning?

Do we sense that if students do the work the learning will occur? Would the learning outcome differ if students entered the task thinking more about the learning they were gaining than the work they were completing?

Work
Activity in which one exerts strength or faculties to do or perform something:
a: sustained physical or mental effort to overcome obstacles and achieve an objective or result
b: the labor, task, or duty that is one's accustomed means of livelihood
c: a specific task, duty, function, or assignment often being a part or phase of some larger activity

Learn
a (1): to gain knowledge or understanding of or skill in by study, instruction, or experience [learn a trade] (2): memorize [learn the lines of a play]
b: to come to be able [learn to dance]
c: to come to realize [learned that honesty paid]

lfie Kohn discussed this in an article titled Students Don't 'Work'—They Learn

Every time we talk about "homework" or "seat work" or "work habits," every time we describe the improvement in, or assessment of, a student's "work" in class, every time we urge

children to "get to work" or even refer to "classroom management," we are using a metaphor with profound implications for the nature of schooling. In effect, we are equating what children do to figure things out with what adults do in offices and factories to earn money.

In the course of learning, students frequently produce things, such as essays and art projects and lab write-ups, whose quality can be assessed. But these artifacts are just so many byproducts of the act of making meaning. The process of learning is more important than the products that result. To use the language of "work" – or, worse, to adopt a business-style approach to school reform – is to reverse those priorities.

In a learning environment, teachers want to help students engage with what they are doing to promote deeper understanding.

Here are two scenarios I observed:

Students in a math class were working in groups, completing 10 problems that the teacher had provided. When I asked one group what was the most important thing to happen in the rest of the class, they said, "to complete the problems." I asked if they'd be surprised if I said the teacher really didn't care how many problems were completed, that the goal was for all four students to know how to do the problems. I don't think they believed me. Notice how differently the task is approached if the outcome is work done vs. learning happening.

I observed a teacher provide students four different tasks to complete to increase their understanding of an event in history. She offered a reward to the first seven students who completed the four tasks. My sense was that a student getting engaged in one or two of the tasks at a deep level would probably learn more, but lose the reward the teacher offered for the work.

Perhaps teachers becoming conscious of their language would change some of their practices.

While pondering this blog content I realized in a PLC gathering that some teachers were attending a PWC- Professional Working Community. Tasks were getting done at the cost of time being spent in professional learning.