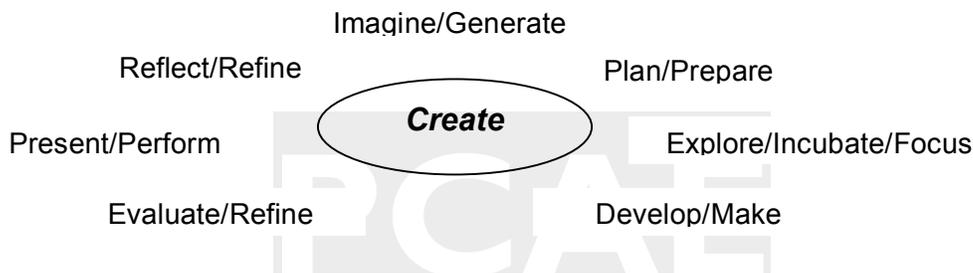## Learning Tools Improve Student Achievement

Jana Larson, a teacher at Sawtooth Elementary School in Grand Marais, MN states, "All [learning] tools come from a teacher's desire to remedy problems, often reoccurring problems [for students in meeting learning goals]." Larson describes multiple learning tools she created for her nine- and ten-year-old students who encountered these difficulties:

- inability to write freely, feeling overwhelmed with beginning a writing task, or being unmotivated to write
- lack of organization and scrambling up ideas, being "all over the board" with content and ideas
- lack of confidence or motivation to share writing

Larson used the create process, identified in the 1997 Arts National Assessment for Education Progress (NAEP) study, to scaffold a series of incremental steps with learning tools to support and guide her students in meeting writing learning goals. (The 1997 NAEP study identified three learning processes in the arts—create, perform and respond. Minnesota teachers in the regional QTNs have defined and illustrated each of these processes in the document, *Engaging Students in the Arts: Creating, Performing and Responding*, which is available from the Perpich Center for Arts Education.)

Imagine/Generate

Reflect/Refine   Plan/Prepare

Present/Perform   *Create*   Explore/Incubate/Focus

Evaluate/Refine   Develop/Make

To help students **imagine, generate and prepare** for writing paragraphs to share with an audience, Larson provides each student with a personal, blank composition "life book," that students decorate and in which they practice free writing based on a series of highly motivating prompts. The free writing practice in the life book enables Larson to see when students don't understand the importance of pre-writing, allowing her to intervene.

Next Larson's students **explore and focus** using one of their free writings by first constructing and then deconstructing first draft compositions, literally cutting their drafts into individual sentences and arranging the parts on large "storyboards." Students augment their original sentences with related "spicy" details and more content to **make** second draft paragraphs.

Larson has created multiple assessment windows—the free writings based on prompts in the life books, the draft compositions and their deconstruction on the storyboards, and second draft compositions based on the storyboards. All these incremental steps toward final drafts allow her to see what students are able and unable to do as they work toward the goal of writing paragraphs to share with their peers. These assessment windows also provide opportunities for students to peer- and self-assess and **reflect** on their written texts as they create them.

Finally, Larson's students **present** their writing to an audience while sitting in the class "writers chair" (a white plastic lawn chair). After reading their writing, students autograph the chair and add the date and title of their work. Reading from the chair is mostly voluntary but occasionally assigned. A lottery is held at the end of the year, and one student wins the chair as a prize.

Incremental step-by-step learning tools based on learning goals and developed around one of the processes—create, perform or respond—identified by NAEP help shape a purposeful, student-centered learning environment. This not only moves arts educators beyond activity driven curriculum and instruction, but also supports high expectations because it allows the teacher to adjust instruction and intervene based on assessment of student understanding during the learning process.

To successfully develop tools that truly support improved student learning, teachers must identify specific learning difficulties and be committed to creatively solving them. Implementing tools that support assessment activities and adjustment of instruction during the learning process demonstrates teacher commitment to high achievement for all students.

Since 1999, teachers in the Arts QTN have developed, shared and adapted learning tools based on the create, perform and respond processes. Over forty tools are currently in the Perpich Center Library Professional Collection.