



Learning by Accident

A familiar request heard by many elementary classroom teachers is: "We have no supply staff today so would you please cover your own class when they would usually be with the special subject teacher?" Usually, this is fine, except in this case it was a little more complicated as it was the Design and Technology teacher who was absent. Still, no problem really: I know the students very well, discipline was not a particular problem with this group, it's only half the class, I am a science teacher and consider myself well-informed about their technology program and workshop practices.

Due to safety issues, some special rules were implemented for this lesson, most importantly none of the power tools in the workshop would be switched on or even touched. There were plenty of activities still possible to allow the students to continue working on their projects. The computers were available for design tasks, hand tools were permissible, audio video was no problem. In order to power the "safe" equipment though, the main power breaker had to be turned on. All the electrically

« « « Submitted by a STAO member, Region 4.

powered devices went through this one breaker.

Toward the end of the session, during clean up, two girls were on the opposite side of the room to myself and I heard the sound of the buffing wheel motor starting. Thinking perhaps the switch had been touched by accident with the broom, I immediately gave a verbal reminder that no power tools were to be used, and moved straight towards them across the lab. In that short instant, as one girl (thankfully) turned off the machine, the other unbelievably leaned down to put her cheek against the "Oooh, so soft!" buffing pad. Seeing this, my voice and words changed to anger and alarm for her safety, just as the ends of her very long hair became wrapped around the motor spindle. Her partner in crime had the sense to manually stop the wheel, which was already partially slowed, but we still had a very shocked young lady, plus an extremely tangled mass of hair. Yes, we did use scissors to liberate the

wheel. Yes, both girls were very shaken, suitably humble and faced severe consequences for their actions. But a large part of my mind was silently relieved, considering the more serious injuries that could have occurred.

Could we have done anything differently? Should we have done anything differently? Safety instructions were given, and precautions were taken. This seemed to be a case of intentional misuse. What if there had been two breaker circuits in the workshop: one for basic equipment and another for the hazardous power tools? Could the tools have been equipped with lock-out safety devices? What if this class had not have taken place at all? Who would have held ultimate responsibility as the lesson was carried out at the Principal's request? Would the answer to this question be different without the Principal being involved? One result for these two ladies and their classroom colleagues was a very