

A Beautiful, Creative Mess

Last year, my students and I engaged in a project based learning opportunity that encompassed big ideas in our science, geography, language and arts curricula. Our goal was to share our learning with the larger community around our essential question, “How does our stuff and the way we use it impact the world?” We wanted to think globally, and act locally by educating the public.

I sparked student curiosity and wonderings through a variety of provocations, including watching “The Story of Stuff”, photographs of extraction and impact on the earth, examining products we use, and teacher directed explorations. By listening to student conversations, documenting ideas shared during knowledge building circles and reading their thinking on exit passes, I began to identify specific areas of student interest. All students formulated their own guiding question (some worked in partners) connected to our essential question. From this, the knowledge building wall was built. All questions were put up on the wall. As students researched and explored, they used the Knowledge Building Scaffolds (printed on colour coded sticky notes) to share their thinking on the KB Wall. The wall became the centre of our inquiry and project. Students began to physically draw connections between ideas, and before I knew it, students were gathered around the wall sharing theories and deep thinking with one another. Although they all had separate questions they were investigating, the entire class began to take ownership of the shared journey. Students found the KB wall was so helpful because they were able to make their thinking visible and gather information from what others were researching and thinking about. One boy commented that, “The Knowledge Building Wall is like a circuit board, where all of our thinking connects. We need everyone’s ideas to make it work.” Students were empowered, everyone had a voice.

We also met regularly in Knowledge Building circles to build on ideas, pose theories, and share critical thinking. It was through one of these circles that students decided they would share the learning through some kind of art (visual, digital, or performance). Students agreed that they could show what they had learned this way, but also touch people on an emotional level, which is what our community decided would have a lasting impact. Students began working collaboratively on all kinds of different art projects. They were making films, writing spoken word and poetry, recording a podcast, building sculptures, designing a costume, and making large scale murals. As one student commented, our room became “A beautiful, creative mess!”

A central component of Project Based Learning is that the work must be shared beyond the classroom in some capacity. We shared our gallery, powerful artistic expression with the public. The student product was very impressive, and all who came commented not only on the quality of the pieces, but the depth of student thinking. “Are they really only in grade 7?”, one person asked me. We met our goal of igniting an emotional response in our audience, that we hope has stuck with them and caused them to think about how their choices impact the world.

Although the product was incredible, it was the process that mattered: the authenticity of the learning, creative and diverse ideas, democratizing of knowledge, pervasive KB, and collective responsibility through the process. Knowledge Building was at the heart of it all.

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