

Knowledge Building - Using a Collective Intelligence and Imagination to Create Community, Inclusion, and Voice for Young People

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Authentic Problem: What can Knowledge Building do for marginalized students?

When I was first introduced to Knowledge Building, in September of 2017, I was teaching in a school designated for students following pathways that included college, trade based employment, or an apprenticeship. The students in this school had a wide range of challenges: learning disabilities, poverty, behaviour issues, lack of confidence in their academic abilities, and lack of support at home - just to name a few. Many were hands on learners who lacked the ability to identify authentic problems, ask meaningful questions, find appropriate solutions, and recognize/interpret reliable sources.

My first question was - could Knowledge Building work with these students?

As well, being a vocational school, most important to the students were the trade-based classes that prepared them for the real world: Machine Shop, Construction, Welding, Baking, Green Industries, Hospitality, Cosmetology, and Auto-Body Shop. I understood that Knowledge Building worked for academic classes like Science and English, but how would it look in such skills based classes?

Currently, I am working in the Care, Treatment, Custody and Corrections Section of the Upper Grand School Board where students are placed in specific programs that meet a very specific needs. Classes are small and often isolated. Students are dealing with authentic problems that include addiction, broken family units, trauma, the justice system, while at the same time trying to work towards completing their secondary school diploma amidst these incredible life challenges.

Many of these students do not have a voice in our education system. They are on the fringes of the community school classroom, trying to remain invisible in the hopes that they will not be called on to answer questions or give their ideas. Often, the expectations educators place on these students are less than those of more academic students and the belief prevails that these students are limited to literal understanding of ideas.

These are the students that Knowledge Building is most suited for. They need their ideas to be validated, encouraged and recognized as "good". They need to feel like they are part of a community with a voice that is valid and educated. They require the team support of their classroom community to develop authentic questions to the problems they often share, and when faced with material that is challenging in class, need to rely on the class "intelligence" as a source of meaningful, thoughtful answers.

BIG QUESTION

How can Knowledge Building help disadvantaged students develop a deep understanding of content in the classroom to ensure their academic success and make them participatory citizens in a Global Community? How can Knowledge Building work to empower these students by giving them a voice, a pathway to a successful future, and a place in our learning community?

Goals:

- Students are able to identify specific, authentic problems as they pertain to curriculum as well as their own circumstances. In such a manner, they will be able to understand what is problematic in their life and prioritize these problems.
- Students will move from a place of isolation to one of community, feeling part of something bigger than themselves.
- Students will move from surface understanding of curricular content and be able to develop a deeper understanding of ideas so as to become more engaged and critical learners.
- Students will develop confidence in themselves as capable and intelligent learners.
- Knowledge Building will be the philosophy and value of our classroom and the language we use to frame our learning experience will be that of the principles of KB.

Promising Practice:

- Students take ownership of the Principles of Knowledge Building, developing their own understanding of what each principle means and how it looks in the classroom.
- Find creative ways to express and evaluate "idea improvement": peer editing, Mindomo Mind Maps (shared with entire class), student coaching of new skills, use of the design process (design, build, evaluate), student led class discussions, class constructed essay topics and design
- Knowledge Forum to co-construct essays by sharing ideas, quotations, questions; Knowledge Forum used to research topics, including novel studies, research projects, film studies, and short story analysis
- Including other educators/colleagues in KB through PLC by establishing a KB team so that the principles of KB move across through the Curriculum and the students hear the language of KB in more than one classroom.
- Use the Learning Commons and Resource Centre to teach students how to access authentic and reliable resources to answer questions. Develop tutorials on how to evaluate and authenticate websites, articles, primary resources, and texts. The Learning Commons can become the "hub" of KB - developing resource packages for projects, team building exercises, making materials for classroom displays, and other supports.

Advances:

- Applied and Essential Level students were able to move past a literal understanding of novels to develop critical and inferential interpretation of the text based on big ideas, thematic exploration, and quotation analysis.
- Students' confidence grew considerably both in their ability to generate ideas and their skill in participating in productive class discussion, working together in teams, and writing well constructed, critical papers
- The classroom had a common language: that of the KB Principles where we often quoted the principles to identify an idea, correct a behaviour, or inspire a skill.

Challenges:

- Students lack the skills to develop useful, well constructed questions.
- Students sometimes struggle to explain or identify their problem.
- Students really found it difficult to locate and access reliable resources and being overwhelmed by the vast empire of the internet. Reading this material was also a challenge.

Next Steps:

I am working in CTCC (Care, Treatment, Custody and Corrections). In this capacity, classes are very small and students are often dealing with incredible life challenges. These kids are shut down, not comfortable with group work, mistrustful of new environments, and lack any vision for their future. I would like to use KB to build their confidence, help them to connect to their peers at their site, connect them to the larger learning community (community schools), help them to identify and label their problems, know what questions to ask to solve these problems, and develop a range of resources that will help them overcome the things that are keeping them from success. Most importantly, I want the students to perceive that they have a future - that they have a chance of being safe, of achieving graduation, of finding a great job that makes them happy, and that they have a place in our society.