KNOWLEDGE BUILDING IN ACTION
INTERMEDIATE (7–8)

Exploring the Arts through Knowledge Building

Written by Evonne Quintal

Bringing IDEAS to life!

3.3 EXPLORING THE ARTS THROUGH KNOWLEDGE BUILDING

Written by Evonne Quintal, Grade 7/8 teacher, HCDSB

INTRODUCTION

Evonne Quintal is a grade 7/8 teacher at St. Anne Elementary school in Burlington. With a Specialist in Visual arts, she was interested in how Knowledge Building could be an effective strategy in approaching the Problem of Practice in her Intermediate Art Class. Before implementing key principles of Knowledge Building, Evonne found that her students had very little ownership of the creative process. When they were given tasks that required critical thinking skills, individual inventiveness, self-expression, and imagination, students often relied on copying or reproducing.

The following case study explores how Knowledge Building challenged students to discover meaning in the art work of others and to think critically about transforming ideas when creating their own art.

What was one of your deepest learnings?

Knowledge Building Principles have transformed how I approach everything in my classroom. The principles are an integrated part of my philosophy now, in all subject areas, and most importantly in building a positive culture of community. Learning used to be an individual process for my students, now learning focuses on knowledge that 'lives in the world' and requires all students in the classroom to extend what we all know. It is about community, and what the community can do to advance knowledge.

START WITH THE KB PRINCIPLES

Improvable Ideas — Students in Evonne's classroom work to understand that all ideas are treated as improvable and buildable. Evonne does a lot of work with students around the 'growth mindset,' which helps build a culture where students feel empowered to share their ideas. Students know that even though they may have misconceptions or ideas that need development, their ideas may spawn new thinking for others in the classroom.

Knowledge Building Discourse — Classroom discussion in the Knowledge Building Circles is not meant to be a presentation or by any means a sharing circle. In Evonne's classroom, students are working to transform and advance not only their own ideas and opinions, but that of others. Evonne provides students with sentence prompts where students can either: Sum Up, Refute, Bounce Off, or Question, their peers' thinking. In using these prompts students are provided with a scaffold to help them not only communicate but learn how to listen. In the Knowledge Building Circles students identify new problems; form new ideas; develop contrasting ideas; debate; and clarify each other's thinking.

KB PROVOCATION

It was important to Evonne that her students engage in authentic learning, where students can have their idea live in the world. In order to do this, students needed to have their curiosity provoked. The KB provocation consisted of establishing an "experience" for the students. The experience could be in the form of field trips, guest speakers, videos. In this case, a variety of art that could provoke engaging conversation was used as a method to pique the students' curiosity. Evonne shared her own knowledge and enthusiasm in order to further the discussion and create more interest.

STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINING IDEA IMPROVEMENT

Move 1: Formulating Questions and Selecting a Promising Question

Students work as a class community to develop questions and ideas that surround the Big Question: **How Do Artists Get Their Ideas?** This is a crucial part of the inquiry process because students are given agency to formulate a whole series of questions that they are responsible for answering, as opposed to the questions coming from the teacher. Students generate a variety of questions; it is the teacher's role as guide in this process to filter these questions. It is important to keep in mind that promising questions are ones that lead to deeper level thinking.

Once students had brainstormed questions, they worked together to group their questions into ideas or themes. These themes were recorded and posted around the room along with the questions that related to them. Students were now able to choose a theme that they were interested in or had a personal connection to. Using a RAN chart, students began their research, answering their own questions or the questions developed by their peers.

Move 2: Knowledge Building Research and Conferences

Students engaged in purposeful individual research, and collaborative conferences with the teacher. Students began their research by developing a theory/prediction as to how a particular artist was moved to create their art. From there, students tried to find supports for their theory by researching what they could about the artist's life and period. Following this work is conference time with the teacher. Conferencing is key to assessing the student's thinking, and to ensuring the student is heading in the right direction. It involves empathetic listening on the teacher's part in order to identify misconceptions or inaccuracies. Conferences took place during research periods, allowing the teacher to have profound conversations with students that helped to further guide their research.

Move 3: Knowledge Building Circles

In this stage, students engaged in a collective sharing of ideas much like it would look in the workplace. Students took on collective responsibility, in which responsibility for the success of the group is distributed across all the students in the classroom. Frontloading around Accountable talk and sentence prompts to guide discussion is key to ensuring effective communication and listening in the KB Circle. In this discussion students explored a variety of influences, both cultural and environmental. Students added onto, summed up, clarified, and refuted each other's ideas. During or after each discussion, students recorded their thoughts on stickies that were linked to others on a giant classroom mind map.

Sample Conference Questions:

- **That's an interesting idea, can you tell me more?**
- **What do you mean by_____?**
- **Could you give me an example? How do you know?**
- **Could you explain that further?**
- **Why do you say that?**
- **How could this art have been made?**
- **Why might this artist have made this here?**
- **Why did this artist choose this subject matter?**
- **What are we assuming? What is another way to look at it?**

Move 4: Evaluating Learning in a Knowledge Building Classroom

Conferencing: Conferencing is used as a primary assessment strategy. It is an ample opportunity for the teacher to quickly assess what students still need to know, as well identify any of their misconceptions or gaps in understanding. It is also a way to deepen ideas and guide students in the direction that they need to be headed.

Exit Tickets: Students reflect on what they know, and what they have learned. This reflection should include their greatest knowledge advances.

Self-Assessment: Students assess their individual listening and communication skills and develop goals for themselves based on this assessment.

Culminating Assignment: Students created their own art piece and Artist Statement. In developing an artist statement to accompany their art, students' thinking became evident.

Move 6: Create a Product that Could Live in the World

In this stage students came up with questions and ideas that the "real artists" are coming up with. Even better, they came up with a fresh new idea that no artist had before. Students used what they learned to inspire their own creations. Students were permitted to choose not only their own subject matter but also their own art materials. In this independent project, students were able to reflect on what inspires them. Student art work was presented at an art show at a local art gallery.

What surprised you?

One thing that surprised me was how natural it felt to release responsibility. I didn't think that I would be able to easily relinquish control in my classroom. But allowing students to participate in planning, evaluating, and identifying their gaps in understanding — in essence, doing the things that have only ever been the responsibility of the teacher — has dramatically changed what I think learning should look like.