

Innovations in Thinking and Learning

Jodie Howcroft – Knowledge Building Circles

JODIE: Knowledge-building circles are -- they're just such a useful tool. At first I found them challenging, and I had to kind of see some happening and see -- and talk to other educators and do a little bit of problem-solving, and now I use them all the time. So they are almost like the backbone of the NPDL. I use it at the beginning of an inquiry to assess prior knowledge. And we use them to come up with our inquiry -- our deep, rich questions for inquiry. It allows me to sort of listen to the kids and see what I need to teach, or maybe re-teach, and what they already know. And it's a great tool at the end of an inquiry to see what they've learned and how they're applying what they've learned. It's also a great equaliser in the classroom. So a student might not have got some information from an online source, but when they're all sharing in a circle, then everybody gets the information. For the knowledge-building circles, I -- sometimes I take notes and sometimes I just listen to the kids and let the conversation flow. Sometimes we go around and take turns speaking, and other times, again, it's just kind of a flow of conversation. But it does take practice.

I had to go back and explicitly teach questioning. They were sometimes asking very thin questions, very quick questions. Or they were asking -- they thought they were asking questions, but it was really more of an observation or a connection. So I went back and explicitly taught that. And I also had to have a kind conversation with the kids about, Does it matter? Because some of the questions that they can ask can be kind of random. And what we're looking for for inquiry are those deep, rich questions. So after having that conversation with the kids, and learning, really, about questioning, I've really found, for this inquiry, they're questioning is so much richer and deeper.

And the other day a student put up his hand and said, "I have a deep-thinking question." And it was really music to my ears to hear that they were really using questions now in a kind of rich, meaningful, thoughtful way.

The word -- another "a-ha!" moment for me was just the fact that kids can handle the vocabulary, sometimes, that you think that they wouldn't be able to handle. So one child in my class came in with something that had the word "sustainability" in it. And it's not a word that I thought I would use in my classroom for this particular unit, but we have been using it. And the kids have been using it in a meaningful way. It just shows you, I think really, that when you open the door and you allow, sort of, creativity and curiosity to happen, that the kids will take it as far as they can. And they can come up with some pretty high-level things if you have that kind of atmosphere in your classroom.