

Innovations in Thinking and Learning

Marlene Scardamalia – Why Knowledge Building

MARLENE: My education was the antithesis of knowledge building. I was a really obedient student, I was a generator. I could get an "A" out of any course I was given. I just knew how to study well. I just did school. I didn't love ideas, I didn't feel the sense of invention that I feel in the work done since. So I think the most profound part came when I was doing my doctoral thesis. And the challenge was to contribute to the world of knowledge, and I thought, wow, that's not anything I've ever done. Never even thought that I could contribute to the world of knowledge. Now I'm getting a doctorate. So I'm well post-high school and post-master's degree. And getting that doctorate, the one thing that kept sticking with me is, well, I've got to contribute something to the world. And that seemed to me a pretty awesome thing to do. Exciting, but also something for which I had no previous experience at all.

It was an absolutely new challenge for me; one I had never faced before. So it was the newness, but it was also the possibility that I might be able to do it. I think then a click happened when I finally got this idea of contributing to the world. And I read the literature differently, I would read it from the point of view of, hmm, what could I add to that? What might be significant? What could be important? Then, of course, I would read a lot, and then I would realize somebody else had had just about every idea -- not just about, somebody else had every idea I had. So then I realized how hard it was to literally contribute something to the world of knowledge. Once you read, lots of other people are actively engaged, too. It is not easy to come up with a new idea.

One of the things that teachers in knowledge building classrooms do that is so understated, it's not guide on the side, it's not facilitation. It's finding and cultivating the sparks. It's literally believing that you will, as a community, come up with something new. And you have the wherewithal to do that. So you cultivate ideas. You find what is actually makes them not so new, so you find the literature that raises the bar constantly on what it's going to take to pull this through. But then I didn't feel so alone anymore. I was in a group of people, we were all pretty excited, and I found that the area I was working in was starting to get people pretty excited. And then I got excited, and then I could make it through the really tough slogging that it takes to get that final degree. But that's how late it took me to understand the difference between knowledge building and schooling as we know it. So you can imagine what delight it is for me when I see young kids, very very young, getting the difference from the earlier age -- like maybe, indeed, we could come up with a populous of engaged students who are excited about working in the world of knowledge.