

# How Can You Show Me What You Know?

Saskatchewan School Library Association

THE MEDIUM – SPRING 2012

Sharon Champ  
Hugh Cairns V.C School  
Saskatoon Public Schools



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## Do You Understand? How Can You Show Me What You Know?

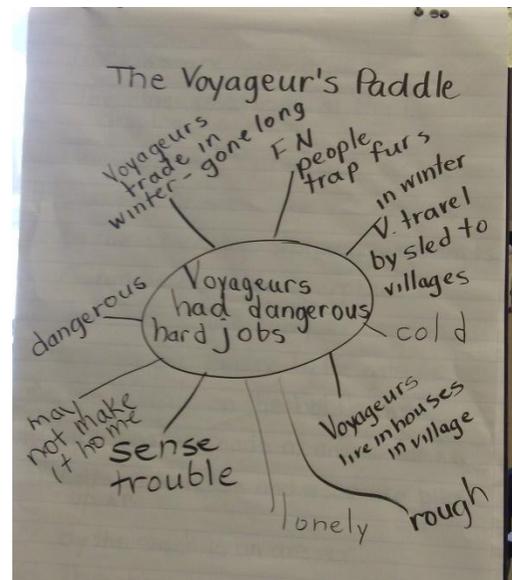
In the past ten years, educational research has invited teachers to shift our focus from covering specific knowledge to supporting students as they construct their understandings of big ideas. I used to ask my students, "What do you know?" But now, the question that runs through my head as I work with my students is "Do you understand?" As a teacher, my new question has become, "What can you do to represent your understandings of the big ideas?"

In my grade two classroom, we have learned to express our thinking in writing, drawing and through technology. Our process is always the same. We learn how to use the tool or process as a large group, we create a model or anchor chart that we can use for a reference, then we practice the tool with a partner and lastly we try to use the tool on our own.

## Using a Web – A New Twist on an Old Standard

I have found the concept of a big idea easiest to introduce in relation to fiction and non-fiction books. As a class, we regularly talk about the author's big ideas. Recently, my class was working on how to use the details from a story to help them formulate their understanding of the author's big idea.

As a class, we are quite comfortable with using a semantic web to show our thinking. Typically we start with the topic in the center and then add our facts around the web. But this time, instead of starting with the big idea in the center of the web, we left the center of the web blank. I read the class a story entitled *The Voyageur's Paddle* by Kathy-Jo Wargin. As I read the story aloud, I paused regularly to allow students time to voice what we considered important details about the story around the blank central circle. When we finished the story, we reread our facts and the students and I co-determined if there was a big idea that could connect all of the details we had read about.



As indicated in the photograph, the students were able to determine an effective big idea. After this lesson, they followed a similar process with a partner and eventually we plan to do this in our independent reading.

### **A Diagram with Depth**

Another key tool we have learned to use this year is a diagram. My class was learning about the water cycle. To represent their understandings about how water changes, we co-constructed the criteria of an effective diagram and the students learned to draw a diagram. In the past, this is where my science instruction would have stopped. But, I wanted them to connect their understanding of the water cycle with their knowledge about how humans impact the water in their environment. So, they drew a second water cycle, this time demonstrating how humans could impact each aspect of the water cycle. Their diagrams represented their understandings of the facts as well as how well they had internalized the big ideas about humans and their impact on their world.

### **Expressing our Passions**

In our study of animal life cycles, my students researched a particular ocean animal. Each student created a detailed picture which demonstrated their understandings of how the animal met its needs throughout its life cycle. In the past, I would have stopped the unit at this point. But, this time I knew that the knowledge base they had developed would be the first step on our way to constructing some big ideas about the rights and responsibilities of human beings in relation to animal rights. As a class, we created a mural of a healthy ocean habitat; and through writing, reading and viewing, we explored some of the ways human beings could impact the ocean habitat. We held a meeting where the children impersonated their animal and spoke passionately about what they needed to live. The children were concerned about the ocean environment and felt we should share this information with others, so we created public service announcements and posted them online. The public service announcements allowed students to demonstrate their understanding of how humans impact the ocean environment and it allowed them to voice their passionate pleas on behalf of their animals.

### **Photo Stories – Connecting the Past and the Present**

Our recent social studies unit focused on how the First Nations, fur traders, the Métis and the settlers depended on the land, and one another to meet their needs. I wanted the students to take the lessons learned about interdependence in our study of exploration of the past and apply them to our school and classroom setting. Throughout the unit, as we learned about the

settlement of Saskatchewan, we continually cycled back to the concept of interdependence and by the time the unit was completed, the students had each constructed their own ideas. But they needed a way to share their thinking. They were invited to work with a partner, create a plan, and then take a photograph that would represent interdependence. They were then challenged to explain how these photographs represented interdependence. Their work was put together on a class created PhotoStory that they could share with other classes in the school.

### **Teaching the Big Ideas**

Learning to teach students how to formulate and express big ideas has challenged me to think differently about instruction. Rather than a narrow focus on facts, I am learning to teach my students to use the knowledge they construct to think about bigger questions and broader understandings. The results have been exciting. When I open space for my children to think, connect, and represent, the power of their ideas never ceases to amaze me.

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