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WINNING WAYS

No one could have known that an inquiry into the disappearing prairie grain elevators would result in winning both the Governor General’s Award for excellence in teaching history, and the prestigious NECC SigTel Award of the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE).

An Ordinary Beginning

It all started ordinarily enough, with stories – personal stories, family stories and stories of family artifacts.

We were working together – Jennifer, a Grade One/Two classroom teacher, and Sharon and Judy from the Galileo Educational Network. We organized our school year using the following questions: What does it take to create learning environments and experiences for students so they come to care deeply about themselves and the world? How can young children create, not just consume and reproduce, knowledge? What does it take for young children to come to know themselves as tellers, seers, hearers and writers of stories?

The stories started to trickle in...

My name is Mikenna Spring Gallinger. My mom and dad liked the name Mikenna. The name Gallinger was passed down from my dad. I got the middle name Spring because it was the first day of Spring when I was born and Spring is my mom’s favorite season.

It wasn’t long before Ryan and his mother appeared at the classroom door with a prayer rug.

Hello my name is Ryan. In Iran, people pray on praying rugs. My dad Dan has a red, gold and black praying rug that was passed down all the way from my Great Great Grandma to my dad. Maybe someday it will be passed down to me.

Spencer’s telling of the jewelry box helped us all understand that the story of the artifact helps to unlock the beauty of the object.

Hello my name is Spencer. My mom has a jewelry box. My great great grandma got it from Argentina. It is silver and mother of pearl. When I first saw it I thought it was ugly. Now that I know the story it is not ugly anymore. Maybe it will be mine someday.

As the children told their stories and listened to each others’ stories we all learned about each other and ourselves. The children were astonished by the wealth of stories they collectively knew.

As that first month progressed, the children started to gain an understanding that their family stories were part of a much larger story. For Ryan, as well as some of the other children, family stories were inextricably linked with world events, some past and some current. We started to notice that the classroom conversations became much richer and went much deeper than they had in previous years.

One morning Spencer arrived at school announcing, “We are the keepers of our stories. We need to find a way to share them with others.” After much discussion, they decided that they needed to go a website so everyone, even grandmas in England, could read them.

Now that would have been enough for most children in most classrooms. But not for these children. The fundamental orientation that governed the teacher and student work in this classroom, and all inquiry work, is that it is not just what you know that matters – it is what you do with what you know that matters.¹

Interrupting Practice

In the vast majority of schools, it is commonplace for teachers to:

- Work in isolation;
- Lack opportunities for sustained professional conversation;
- Lack opportunities to connect educational research to changing practice;
- Lack of opportunities to work on improving instructional practice.

However, we know that all teachers require a particular type of professional development in order for instructional practice to change or grow in fundamental ways. We know that the professional development has to:

- Open teaching practice to others in a variety of ways;
- Be sustained over time;
- Address instructional practice;
- Provide mentorship in deepening content knowledge;
- Provide opportunities for teachers to partic-

ipate a variety of inquiry-based professional learning conversations;

- Examine teaching practice in terms of current literature on how students learn, knowledge building, evidence-based instructional decision making, inquiry, reflection and school reform

Our working together was much more than simply planning together. We created a dialogue using both face-to-face and online, through Intelligence Online (io),² spaces where we could supportively and critically observe how the work with the children was progressing. Our conversations required an openness to questioning, an attunement to what was happening in the classroom, and a focus on the understandings that the children were developing.

We kept on asking each other, “So what now?” “Who cares?” “What stories are worth telling?” and “What stories tell what needs to be told?” We wanted the students to be able to do something with what they knew. The website was important, but we wanted more and so did the children.

We started pushing against the inertia of the status quo – teacher planning and teaching practices that involve shallow tasks and activities that:

- Few people outside a school would actually perform;
- Originate with and only meet minimum expectations of the Program of Studies;
- Set out one right way, or one right solution.³

We wanted to come together around genuine issues, problems, questions, investigations or explorations that were full of possibilities, that provided opportunities to create or produce something that both created knowledge and made a contribution.

Disappearing Grain Elevators

One day as Jennifer was driving along Macleod Trail in Calgary, she noticed that the wooden grain elevator that stood so proudly alongside the railroad track at its south end was gone. Gone! It was there in the morning and gone by afternoon. It was hard to comprehend. How could this familiar landmark just disappear during the course of one day?

Our inquiry topic had arrived. Someone needed to do something. However, this was not going to be easy.

The task of trying to tell the story of the disappearing grain elevators was a challenging one for many reasons. First of all many of the students had no idea what a grain elevator was. Some thought it was a way of carrying grain to a supermarket while others thought it was a place where pioneers made their bread.

Trying to learn about grain elevators and their forgotten stories was a challenge because most of the grain elevator resources are written for farmers and those familiar with farming. Most resources were either about the mechanical aspects or are simply photos of structures that have long since been destroyed.

New questions arose for Jennifer: Should she give up and develop work sheets that explained the workings of a grain elevator? Should she narrow the students' exposure to the one or two books and a handful of web sites that she felt they could understand? What did she really want the students to get out of this inquiry into grain elevators now that she was faced with so few suitable resources?

Rather than immerse the students in a bunch of facts about grain elevators, we decided to immerse the students in stories about grain elevators. We contacted a number of local people, including people from the Grain Academy to give us a hand.

Robust inquiry-based studies require knowledge-centered, assessment-centered and learner-centered environments.⁴ Holding these three lenses together we worked from the students' ever deepening understanding of story and our questions to design student work that:

- Emanated from questions, problems or explorations that had meaning to the students;
- Adults at work in the community might actually tackle;
- Provided opportunities for students to create something that contributed to the world's knowledge;
- Demanded a variety of roles and perspectives.⁵

Jennifer's initial concerns were quickly alleviated.

All I had to do was show the children the books and photos and the questions and comments started to fly; "They are so tall! Why are they so tall? They are brightly coloured.

Why are they brightly coloured? What do the words say on the side of the building? What do the words mean? What were the buildings used for?

Lana Skauge, a storyteller told the children, *The Day the Sky Got Bigger*, a story about disappearing grain elevators.

Students asked: What were these structures? What significance did they play in Alberta's history? What would happen if these structures were destroyed or changed? What could they do about it?

The students immersed themselves in learning about the various wooden grain elevators that still dotted the prairie landscape. Some begged their parents to drive them to the various locations so they could take pictures of them.

I am a grain elevator. This is my story.

I was born in 1912. My name is Airdrie. Some people call me prairie giant. Other people call me prairie castle. A farmer named Markus the Farmer built me out of wood. Before I was here the town was flat. I am bright red. I stand over the other buildings. I show people the way home.

Every Saturday I love seeing James and his Grandpa come and drop off their grain. I love gobbling grain up. The grain goes in to my tummy. Then the grain goes on to my arm. My arm drops the grain into the train barrels.

I can store 25,000 bushels of grain. I am 70 feet tall.

I feel so hungry when the train comes and takes my grain. But I am happy because children get cereal and bread to eat. My job is important.

Now I'm getting old. James's Grandpa died last summer. James still comes and drops his grain off. I see James and his son with him every Saturday.

My paint is peeling off. I'm starting to fall down. I'm still standing though. I hope I do not fall down. I want to see James's son grow up.
— Megan, Grade 2

The students also grew various grains in the classroom. A painted three-dimensional cardboard large grain elevator sat in one corner of the classroom. Everyone who entered the classroom was invited into a conversation about grain elevators. Did they know that the wooden grain elevators were disappearing? Did they know that High River had destroyed its wooden grain elevator?

Someone should save some of the wooden grain elevators.

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EN BREF Comment peut-on créer des environnements et des expériences d'apprentissage qui incitent les jeunes à se préoccuper vraiment d'eux-mêmes et du monde? Nous voulions que notre rencontre porte sur des enjeux, des problèmes, des questions ou des explorations véritables, suscitant des possibilités de créer ou de produire quelque chose qui engendrerait des connaissances tout en faisant une contribution. La disparition de l'élevateur à grains local a ouvert la voie aux interrogations. Les élèves ont posé des questions. Quelles étaient ces structures ? Quelle est leur importance dans l'histoire albertaine ? Qu'arriverait-il si elles étaient détruites ? Que pouvaient-ils faire ? Les élèves ont plongé dans l'apprentissage par enquête au sujet des différents élévateurs à grains en bois dispersés dans les prairies. Leur histoire est maintenant affichée à l'Assemblée législative de l'Alberta.

We continued to correspond with various experts, to develop a more informed stance. This was Alberta's centennial year and the children decided that they needed to write to the boss, Premier Ralph Klein. In addition to writing Premier Klein, they also took their concerns to the news media.

Premier Ralph Klein was slow in responding to the students. So they wrote another letter, "Mr. Klein, please send us a letter back stating what you will do about this. We need to keep the story of the grain elevators alive." Well, it wasn't long before the children were invited to the legislature in Edmonton to meet with Gary Mar, the Minister of Community Development, to plead their case.

Their work became an official Alberta Centennial Project. The following story, compiled and written by the children now hangs in Alberta's Legislature.

We are the young children of this generation. Our story speaks on behalf of the few remaining grain elevators in this province. Alberta's old wooden grain elevators hold many stories from our past: stories of our ancestors and their pioneering spirit. Every time we destroy another old elevator we lose a precious part of our Western Heritage.

I am an old Alberta grain elevator and this is my story. Before I was here the town was flat. Now I stand over the other buildings. I show people the way home. I am a signpost of the prairie.

I stand in the sunset. Wheat surrounds me. I stand tall and proud. Some people call me Prairie Giant. Other people call me Prairie Castle.

Before I was a grain elevator I was a tree and a farmer cut me down and built me. I was built with wood and nails. I was built for a Province that has lots of grain. I am yellow and orange. I am 90 feet tall. Now that's tall! I can store 25,000 bushels of grain.

I fill the world with grain and this is how I do it. Trucks come to dump grain onto my scale. Then the worker scoops a little bit of grain and weighs it. The rest of the grain is stored in my annex. Then the worker pays the farmer and the farmer goes to buy his groceries. My job is babysitting grain. My other job is sorting grain. I like my job. Really I do!

Every Saturday I love seeing Tom and his Grandpa come and drop off their grain. I feel so hungry when the trains come and take my grain, but I am happy because children get cereal and bread to eat.

The sun shines on me. People drive past me. I've lost my name because my paint is peeling off. I don't know what's going to happen to me because all of my friends are collapsing. I know I am the next to be knocked down. I'm not ready.

Tom's Grandpa died last summer. I'm starting to fall down. I'm still standing though. Tom still comes and drops off his grain with his son every Saturday. I hope I do not fall down. I want to see Tom's son grow up.

I am a very important part of history. There are more things to learn about me. I hope that I will be standing forever. If not the history will be forgotten. History is grain elevators. History is a second ago. History is everything. I am an old Alberta grain elevator. Please don't forget my story.

Keep the legacy of the wooden grain elevator alive so that we the children can remember.

Our work oriented the learning of students to 'norms' of excellence. This inquiry-based work surpasses what is conventionally asked of students and teachers. It honours disciplined inquiry. Many are astounded by the deep understanding demonstrated by the students and their deep care and compassion. This is the kind of work that results in awards for teachers and students.

You can see the student work at <http://www.galileo.org/schools/district-cbe/princeofwales/stories/index.htm>

DR. SHARON FRIESEN IS CO-FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT OF THE GALILEO EDUCATIONAL NETWORK AND AN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR IN THE FACULTY OF EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY. SHE HAS CO-AUTHORED TWO BOOKS: *BACK TO THE BASICS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING: THINKING THE WORLD TOGETHER*, WINNER OF THE 2004 AERA DIVISION B BOOK AWARD AND *CURRICULUM IN ABUNDANCE*.

JUDY MARTIN IS A CONSULTANT AND MENTOR WITH THE GALILEO EDUCATIONAL NETWORK SHE HAS EXPERTISE IN HELPING TEACHERS DESIGN AND IMPLEMENT TECHNOLOGY-RICH, INQUIRY-BASED STUDIES IN ALL CORE DISCIPLINES.

JENNIFER JOHNSON-GEORGE IS A GRADE ONE/TWO TEACHER AT PRINCE OF WALES SCHOOL IN CALGARY, ALBERTA. JENNIFER WON THE 2006 GOVERNOR GENERAL'S AWARD FOR TEACHING EXCELLENCE IN CANADIAN HISTORY. ALONG WITH GALILEO EDUCATIONAL NETWORK SHE WON THE 2006 SIGTEL ONLINE LEARNING AWARD.

Notes

- 1 J. Gilbert, *Catching the Knowledge Wave: The Knowledge Society and the Future of Education* (Wellington, N.Z.: NZCER Press, 2005).
- 2 Intelligence Online (<http://www.iomembership.com>) is an online learning and design environment for teachers.
- 3 Galileo Educational Network, Inquiry Rubric, 2002-2007. Retrieved January 9, 2007 from <http://www.galileo.org/research/publications/rubric.pdf>
- 4 J. D. Bransford, L. Brown and R. Cocking, eds., *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience and School* (Expanded Version). Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 2000).
- 5 Galileo Educational Network.

