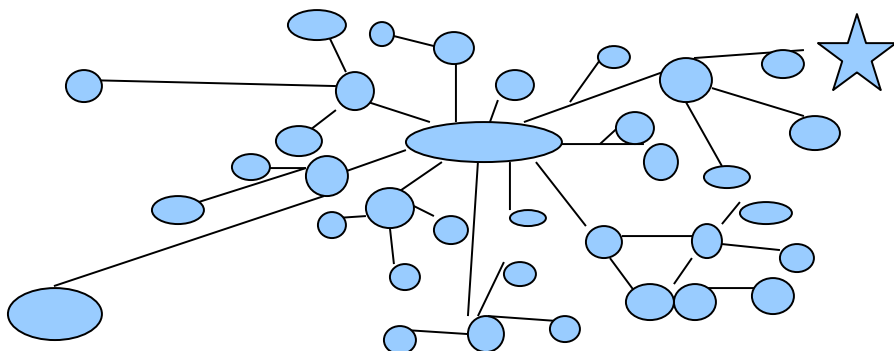


Webs Don't Work!

How often, as teachers, do we hear that webs don't work? The government says we should teach students how to use them to take notes and to plan their writing. Unfortunately, I think some teachers – who agree with the students – have never experienced the joy of effective webbing and simply teach the basics because they are supposed to do so. I, on the other hand, love webbing. It is the best way to support any complex writing I have to do.



True, I don't web to write a page or two. Just like the kids I can keep that much information and organization in my head. But, I will web for something longer – or for something whose deepest meanings are not easily grasped. Whether I am writing ten pages, or two paragraphs, a web is the place to find the truth. Especially, as it is relevant to me.

When I turn to Imaginative Education to help inspire students, I want them to really try using a web rather than going through the motions for academic credit. For the inspiration, and to make it relevant, I ask myself, “What is the main heroic quality of webbing?” (I teach students who respond well to the Romantic Framework as envisioned by Kieran Egan. <http://ierg.net/teaching/plan-frameworks/index.html>) I wonder what the story behind webbing might be. The best answer I have? Revelation. A successful web reveals something, it leads to an “Aha! Moment”.

The final assignment was an essay about a character in the movie, **Treed Murray**. Each student had chosen a character from the small cast of six characters, had written at least thirty-five questions about the character, and was now ready to start the web that wouldn't work. They were unconvinced by my encouragement or enthusiasm. Experience had taught them it was a waste of perfectly good essay writing time. And, success was going to require work – clearly, this was not on the agenda! (Did I mention that I teach teenagers in an alternate program that serves those with identified behavioural difficulties?)

How did it go? What did I do?

First, we split into little groups and everyone spent half an hour looking up the predictions of the Mayans, of Nostradamus, and of the Book of Revelations with the purpose of reporting to the group what those predictions and revelations are and how people receive, or achieve, revelations of that magnitude. This class went beautifully. Students were engaged in the hunt and enthusiastically reported on the predictions and revelations. With some, I coached them through their search skills and discouraged them from using Wikipedia as their primary source. Others were completely independent. Guessing about how the revelations and “aha!” moments were achieved was tentative and most of the class of twelve didn't have any idea. Because we had been having such a good time discussing the predictions and our opinions about them, the class gave me the benefit of their attention while I told the story of people throughout the ages gathering up the clues until they finally had an inspired new understanding – a revelation.

At this point, we changed the context and brought out flip chart pages for their webs. Felt pens and colour were encouraged but not mandatory. Level 1 of the webs were categories synthesized from

the 35 or more questions that students had already written. Choosing categories was difficult for some students but most were able to come up with five to seven, as required: Family, Gangs, Relationships, Violence, Personality, Money, and so on.

In the next class, I showed a video about how to have an “aha!” moment (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNVEZ5Whmk8>). The two criteria for an “aha!” moment, or revelation, are 1) the answer pops into your head out of the blue, and 2) as soon as it pops into your head you *know* it's right.

Jason Lehrer, the host of the video, is describing what happens in our brains for the “aha!” moment and one of the tools used to record it is remote associations. In this example, three words that appear to be unrelated all become a compound word with the addition of a single common word: Crab, Pine, Sauce. (The answer is “apple”.) The students loved this and asked for more. I promised them more for the following day – and, the fun took us through four more days as we started each class with a remote association challenge.

Suddenly, all the unbelievers were hooked. Out of 33 students spread over three classes, I would typically expect strong engagement from two, engagement verbally but not leading to completed work from about six, another twelve might “do their best” by trying to give me, the teacher, what I want until the burden of guessing and failing became too great. That would leave thirteen refusing to even try a web. For five classes students have been working on their webs. At day five, some were losing focus. Day five!

Day two, one boy had his “aha!” moment and moved onto writing a thesis statement based on that revelation, and using a planning template to do a thorough organization for his essay. The planning was beyond anything I have ever seen in my fifteen years of teaching teenagers. Thorough, creative, profound. Since then, there have been four other students have “aha!” moments. They are thrilled and engage fully in writing a thesis statement – another task that is usually poorly received and understood. So far, it seems that I need do a very minimal amount of instruction about a thesis statement compared to my usual lessons.

Those that have yet to experience an “aha!” moment will have more days to get there. As I told them, if you stop before the revelation, the web *will* be a waste of time. My plan is to work as individually as possible with the students to get an “aha!” moment, a coherent and inspiring thesis statement, and an essay of at least five paragraphs. When finished, they can create a plasticine representation of their character and his, or her, struggles or begin an independent novel study. In this way, I can make time for everyone to succeed. Already, it is clear that everyone – except one boy with a severe learning difference, two students whose attendance is irregular, and another one whose perfectionism might border on obsessive-compulsive disorder (a request for assessment is in) – have a much deeper grasp of the character, the character's development, and the themes of the movie than ever before.

So tempted to say, “I told you so! Webs do so work,” but I will resist the impulse. For me, another example of Imaginative Education helping me to engage students in trying something they “know” is boring and useless.