

How the Whole Thing Got Started

Many teachers have asked me that question. Well, it happened spontaneously like so many great ideas.

In 1999, I was teaching a second grade class in Gibsonton, Florida. This one day, we were reading *The Stories That Julian Tells*. In the book, the father is whipping up “egg whites.” For some reason, I asked the students if they knew what the father was doing? They thought he was hitting (whipping) the shells of the eggs and that would make something for the pudding. I knew they were visualizing the wrong thing, so of course I had to correct that. When I asked them what egg whites were, not one child knew. So I drew an egg on the board, and discussed the parts of an egg while I labeled it. When I was done, one of the students asked if they could draw and label it, also. I thought that was an awesome idea, so I had the students draw it on a piece of paper. I labeled the parts carefully, and asked the students to do the same, fully expecting them to be careful and label correctly... you know, like their teacher. WRONG! Their labels were in most cases written sideways and misspelled. Their lines weren't touching the part being labeled. I taught proper labeling procedure, how to do it “like college kids do” and noticed that the students were really “into it.” They corrected their drawings and labels.

Soon after that, we came across the word “deck.” Again, I asked and no one knew what it was, so we drew a boat and labeled it. Then the word “hinges” appeared as a choice on a popular assessment. Only one child knew what hinges were. I think that was because his dad was in construction. So we did parts of a door. It was at that time, I started listing common things my students didn’t know on the outside of a file folder. The list got so long, that I had to continue on the inside of the folder. Many of those things, became the objects in my first book, *The New Book of Knowledge* (a teacher resource book) and in later books for teachers, parents, and students.

Well, I wanted MY second graders to be the smartest ones going into third grade (of course), so I decided to do something about expanding their background knowledge and foundational vocabulary of common... everyday things. That would improve both their reading and their writing! I said, “Let’s start our very own Book of Knowledge. Let’s put all sorts of important things we need to know and remember in there.” The students loved the idea. The Book of Knowledge concept was born. I gave them each a journal, and away we went!

The next year I changed schools and had an idea to try doing Book of Knowledge lessons with the dropout prevention 4th grade class. This class had many unmotivated learners with many behavior issues. Typically, these students’ state reading and writing scores were very low. I worked with them for that school year (2000-2001) building their

own Book of Knowledge. It didn't take many weeks before they got all excited about it. Their classroom teacher and I noticed that their confidence in reading and writing was getting stronger, and we saw improvement in both. By state testing time, the scores of that class improved so much that it was the major factor in the school grade improving from a D to an A in that school year. That was the proof of concept I needed. I was in the local newspaper holding my very thin *Book of Knowledge* along with the principal of the school and the Governor of Florida. (My 15 minutes of fame!) I then realized that this idea could help countless students improve in reading and writing. So I added more pictures, lists and ideas to *The New Book of Knowledge* and republished it as a revised edition.

The following school year I did Book of Knowledge lessons in grades one - five, and students loved it!!! And THAT'S How This Whole Thing Got Started.

Fast forward to 2005. I moved to Wimauma Elementary which had a large population of English Language Learners. I added to my list on the same file folder as I encountered common things the students didn't know. A friend of mine said, "Why don't you use the pictures in *The New Book of Knowledge* and make a student book... like a dictionary for them to use." I LOVED that idea, and that's how *The Illustrated Dictionary of Everyday Things* got started. Then I decided to make a tutoring guide so that non-educators could help the students

learn this foundational vocabulary in a systematic way during one-on-one tutoring sessions. (I still love that idea.) I submitted *The illustrated Dictionary* and the “Tutoring Guide” to the District Review Committee for approval, and they approved it. A few years later, I added to the Tutoring Guide, and it became the Teaching Guide, for use by teachers or tutors. I kept improving it, to the most recent edition which I completed this summer.

Children love learning about new things, and they love receiving their own *Illustrated Dictionary*. If teachers will follow my suggestions, they will see their students’ vocabulary grow, and their students will become excited about words. They should see their students’ reading comprehension improve, their spelling improve and their writing of narratives improve as they add specific details. Best of all, the students’ confidence will grow as they feel smarter and smarter. This will undoubtedly improve their self-esteem.

I can’t prove that my dictionary will improve the students’ reading scores any more than we can prove that having a Webster’s dictionary will improve reading scores. It depends on if the students use them and if the teachers’ follow my suggestions. If they do, I’m convinced (based on past experience) that student improvement in both reading and writing can be expected.

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