

# FIELDWORK

NOTES FROM EXPEDITIONARY LEARNING CLASSROOMS

SEPTEMBER 2003

VOLUME XI, NUMBER 4

## Amazing Yellowstone:

### A PRODUCT-DRIVEN EXPEDITION

BY CARRI THOMASON

#### IN THIS ISSUE:

##### *Planning Learning Expeditions*

###### *Guiding Question:*

What strategies help us plan learning expeditions that work?

Compelling Expedition Topics 3

By Barbara Waxman and Scott Dolquist

A Reason to Learn 6  
By Chris Koerber

Tapping Even the Most Reluctant Readers 9

By Ana Guerra  
Inspiring Students to Become Experts 10  
By Jeanne Anderson

For more teacher tools related to this issue, visit our website at [www.elob.org/publications/webarchive/v11n4tt.html](http://www.elob.org/publications/webarchive/v11n4tt.html).

Three years ago I traveled with my first crew of third- and fourth-grade students across eastern Idaho, into Montana, and finally to Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming, for three days of fieldwork. At the time, we were beginning an expedition on volcanoes in Idaho, and what better place to explore them than inside the largest caldera in the United States? I had no idea that the 150-mile trip from our school—Pocatello Community Charter School in Pocatello, Idaho—to Yellowstone would shape the learning in my classroom two years later.

At the park, we observed a wide variety of animals in their natural habitat. Most notably, we witnessed elk during mating season. As we stood less than 20 yards away, bull elk fought for harems. We explored many of the park's hydrothermal features, and students measured the temperature and acid levels in hot springs and mud pots. As a service project, we planted juniper bushes for the elk.

The students were exposed, some of them for the first time, to an entire community of people who have dedicated their lives to under-



Fourth grader Taybor Hendricks, of Pocatello Community Charter School in Pocatello, Idaho, drew this bison for an expedition on Yellowstone National Park.

standing and preserving the natural world. The passion of the park rangers in Yellowstone was contagious. After returning from the park, many of the students began searching for more information and often requested help. Eventually, this quest became a class project.

*continued on next page*

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*Amazing Yellowstone, continued from page 1*

As our crew embarked on a search for knowledge, we found that books about Yellowstone fit into two clear categories: informative books written at a level beyond most children's comprehension abilities; or books written specifically for children, yet containing simple, almost "dumbed down" information. These children's books were the most frustrating for my crew. They often complained about how adults do not trust children to really investigate topics as rich as Yellowstone. We eventually gave up on the search and moved on with our volcano expedition.

The following year, I took a second crew of students to Yellowstone. We were able to spend an entire day with a park ranger exploring ancient caves, tracking wolves, and hiking among elk, deer, bison and big horn sheep. Again, the students returned to school with a drive to learn more about Yellowstone. Yet again, their searches were met with disappointment.

*I planned the content of  
the field guide and the  
direction of the expedition  
according to audience  
interest, standards, and  
fieldwork opportunities.  
Each product created  
during the yearlong  
expedition built upon or  
led to the creation of the  
field guide.*



These wolves were drawn by Austin Bray, a fourth-grade student at Pocatello Community Charter School in Pocatello, Idaho, for the expedition Amazing Yellowstone.

HIDDEN OPPORTUNITIES

Sometimes, teachers are so focused on the plans they have made for their students that they miss authentic learning opportunities that land right in front of them. This was the case with me. It never occurred to me that we could design a learning expedition built upon the creation of a field guide for children. The actual idea to create Amazing Yellowstone came from my daughters, Ryleigh and Bayleigh. On a trip to Yellowstone, they too noticed a lack of meaningful information. I remember one of the girls making the comment, "You should have your class make a book about Yellowstone for us!" It was through these words that the seeds for the expedition were planted.

Unlike other expeditions I had planned, I built this one entirely upon a product for a very real audience: children interested in Yellowstone. Before this experience, many of the expeditions in my classroom had been

*continued on page 4*

# Compelling Expedition Topics:

## UNCOVERING CONTENT THROUGH DEPTH

BY BARBARA WAXMAN AND SCOTT DOLQUIST

When teachers share their expedition topics at planning institutes, one can predict when colleagues will nod with expressions of interest and engagement. Heads nod when the topic allows teachers to visualize what students will be learning, and the issues with which they will wrestle over the course of the expedition. When teacher presenters explain these topics in detail, it soon becomes clear that the content of the expedition offers in-depth exploration, multiple perspectives, and authentic research.

Analysis of these compelling expedition topics reveals powerful new strategies for organizing expedition content and for achieving in-depth understanding. Compelling topics consist of a focus of inquiry, and two or more in-depth investigations designed to give the focus of inquiry context. The focus of inquiry provides a purpose and reason to study a topic, and further narrows a topic by concentrating on a specific setting, event, place, or issue. The in-depth investigations elaborate on the focus of inquiry, and lead students to need to know specific content, big ideas, concepts, and skills. Compelling expedition topics take content standards that need to be taught, and reshape and organize them in order to make them engaging and accessible to students.

Carri Thomason and Christopher Koerber's expeditions, featured in this issue, are good examples of compelling topics. In Thomason's case, the focus of inquiry emerged—a child's view of Yellowstone Park—because her students were thirsty for knowledge about the park, but could not find serious information geared toward elementary school children. She determined that to know and understand Yellowstone

Park well, her students would need to engage in three in-depth investigations: the history of humans at the park, the park's hydrothermal features, and the biology of its wildlife.

In Koerber's case, he knew he needed to teach the eighth-grade science curriculum that included ecology and earth science, chemistry, and biology. However, in his quest to make the science content coherent and engaging instead of isolated and disconnected, he found a local dilemma that created a need to know those scientific disciplines. Thus, the local dilemma, preserving a particular strain of wild Atlantic salmon, became the focus of inquiry. To fully understand this strain of salmon that inhabits a local Massachusetts stream, his students immersed themselves in three in-depth investigations: the life cycle and genetics of this strain of salmon, the chemistry of the waters that the salmon inhabit, and the ecological and watershed issues surrounding the stream. Each in-

*continued on page 12*

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### COMPELLING TOPIC (EXCERPT)

Focus of Inquiry: *McCarthyism and Civil Rights*

- ~ In-depth investigation: Haley Ferguson and the National Theatre Project
- ~ In-depth investigation: Dalton Trumbo and the Hollywood Ten
- ~ In-depth investigation: The Rosenbergs' Trial
- ~ In-depth investigation: Civil Rights post 9/11

Guiding Question: In times of perceived threats to national security, whose view of civil rights is correct?

For complete outline with specific content go to Fieldwork on-line at [www.elob.org](http://www.elob.org)

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*Amazing Yellowstone, continued from page 2*

built upon my passions, project-rich ideas, and state standards. I created the final product as a result of the expedition. With *Amazing Yellowstone*, the end product, a children's field guide, was the foundation upon which the expedition was built. I planned the content of the field guide and the direction of the expedition according to audience interest, standards, and fieldwork opportunities. Each product created during the yearlong expedition built upon or led to the creation of the field guide.

#### PLANNING THE EXPEDITION

I began writing the expedition by reading children's field guides for other topics. This research provided me with ideas for the content. Next, I considered the major attractions of Yellowstone. What do children want to see when they visit the park? Finally, I reviewed the Idaho State Achievement Standards to make sure that I would be addressing major standards required by the state. I narrowed down the three major areas of study to include the history of humans in the park, exploring

*When students are given a reason to create high quality documents or products, the enthusiasm and responsibility for learning increase dramatically.*

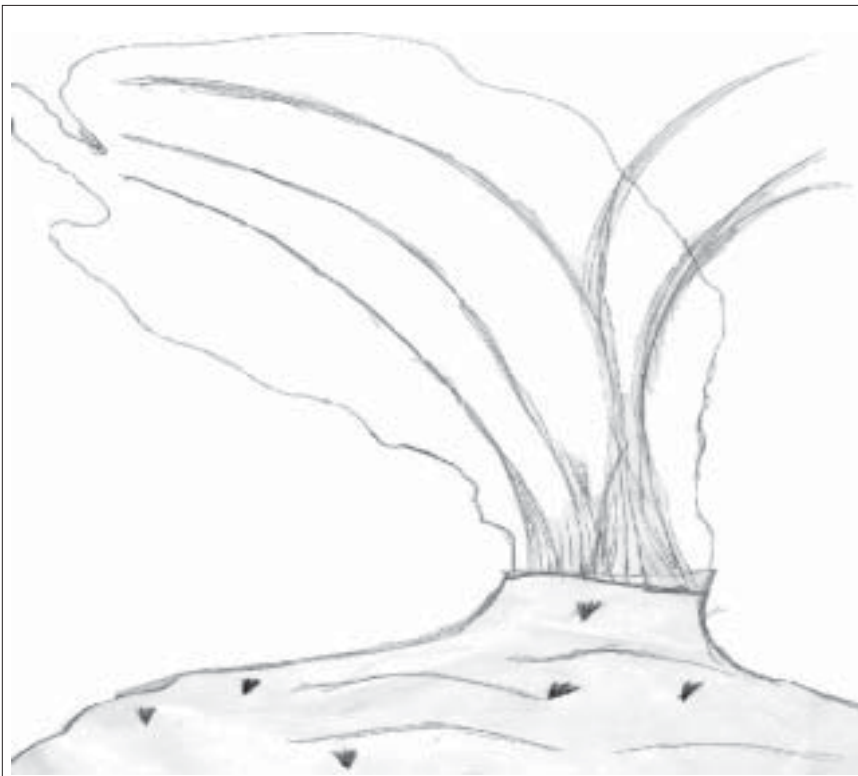
the hydrothermal features of the park, and understanding the biology of the wildlife in the park. Because I started the expedition with the final product in mind, I was able to create detailed plans for each project along the way. The creation of each plan focused on a different topic, but shared a final product: the field guide.

I organized the creation of the field guide around the three in-depth investigations, which helped guide student focus. The children studied the hydrothermal features in small collaborative groups. These groups worked together on research and wrote a page for the field guide collaboratively. They studied the second in-depth investigation—the history of humans in the park—through individual research imbedded with a great deal of peer critique, scaffolding, and revisions. We moved with ease from a collaborative effort to individual work, as well as from one subject to another, because of the familiar format of the field guide. By the time we began exploring the wildlife in the park, most of the students were able to create accurate sketches of wildlife, write informed letters to the editor and descriptive paragraphs with very little scaffolding. Again, we had a new subject but a familiar format in which to express our learning.

#### PURPOSEFUL WORK

I have found that having a clear and real purpose driving the expedition has lent itself to compelling lessons, authentic audiences, and

Fourth-grade student Andrew Nickell, of Pocatello Community Charter School in Pocatello, Idaho, sketched this geyser for an expedition on Yellowstone National Park.



high quality student work. The projects that lead to the final product have real meaning to the students when they can easily see the connection and understand why their work is important. When students are given a reason to create high quality documents or products, the enthusiasm and responsibility for learning increase dramatically.

An expedition focused on a topic so connected to the local community and the fascination of children provided a limitless assortment of outreach connections. We subscribed to the local newspaper, where my students searched every day for new issues about the park. Using the newspaper and other local resources, we contacted at least 10 different experts on Yellowstone in our community, all of whom willingly shared their knowledge and experiences with our crew. Opportunities for our crew to experience the need for a child's field guide about Yellowstone were the driving forces in the quality of work. Our crew felt that other children in our country were missing a chance to learn about an extraordinary piece of our earth.

With every expedition, a thousand external factors promote the revision of the original plan. Student interests alter the direction, prior knowledge speeds up or slows down the process, and new ideas emerge. Compelling topics such as Yellowstone seem to constantly foster new ideas and it becomes tempting to add projects or change focus. In an expedition

*The children were completely invested in the product and knew that their work would transcend the walls of our school and even our community.*



like Amazing Yellowstone, distractions are everywhere. With every new idea, my crew and I sat down to answer one question: How does this build on the field guide? If we could not answer that question, or were unsatisfied with the answer, we stored the idea for another expedition. The practice of constantly asking how something fits has imbedded itself in my ever evolving pedagogy on the creation of learning expeditions.

Amazing Yellowstone has been my favorite expedition since Pocatello started working with Expeditionary Learning four years ago. When my crew is talking about why they feel successful with this expedition, a wide variety of responses emerge. However, all discussion comes back to the fact that there was a purpose and an audience for every learning goal. The children were completely invested in the product and knew that their work would transcend the walls of our school and even our community. This crew was reaching out to share a newfound knowledge and passion for their world. ✎

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Eris Hanson, a fourth grader at Pocatello Community Charter School in Pocatello, Idaho, drew this wolf for the expedition Amazing Yellowstone.

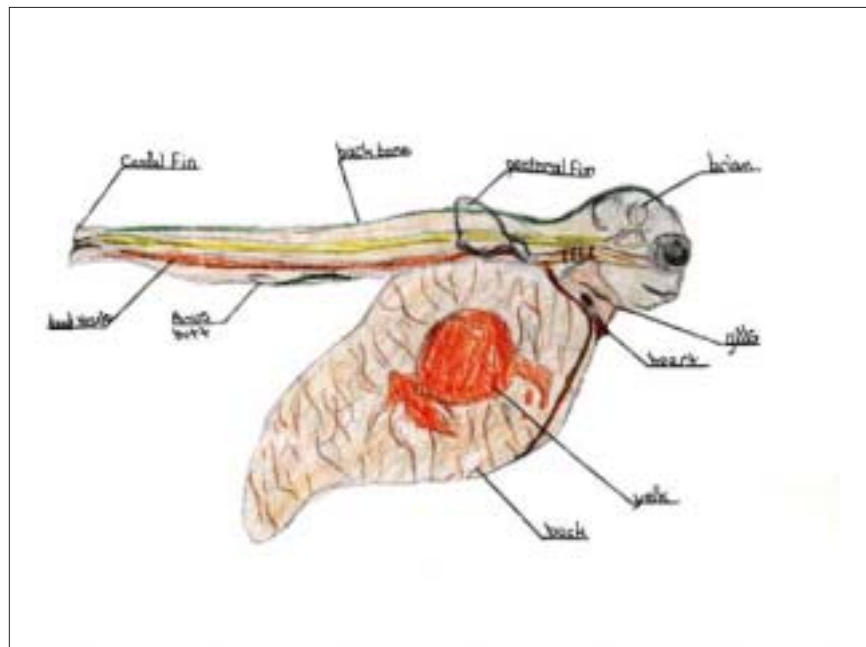
# A Reason To Learn:

## RAISING SALMON TO RELEASE IN A STREAM

BY CHRISTOPHER KOERBER

In designing learning expeditions, I have found that choosing the *right* topic eliminates half the struggle. Over the years, I have had the best success teaching expeditions when I have picked a compelling topic that allows for a powerful and meaningful central experience, or set of experiences, that will tie together all the required skills and content. While I have had my share of disappointments, one of my best successes both engages students and covers in-depth investigations in biology, ecology, chemistry, and humanities. At the Willauer School on Thompson Island in Boston, Massachusetts, our sixth-grade students unceremoniously refer to this experience as the Salmon Expedition.

Greg Sanchez, an eighth-grade student at Lynn Community Charter School in Lynn, Massachusetts, did this scientific drawing of an alevin for an expedition on salmon in the 2000-2001 school year.



### THE CORE EXPERIENCE

In this learning expedition, students raise genetically wild, endangered Atlantic salmon in an incubator tank in their classroom. Students pick up the eggs from the Nashua National Fish Hatchery in New Hampshire in late January. The eggs hatch around the end of March, and the young fry begin feeding at the end of April. A month later, students release the healthy fry into a tributary of the Merrimack River, which was historically a salmon spawning bed. We release them with the hope that our tiny salmon will some day return and spawn there themselves as wild adults.

This experience of raising salmon in the classroom is absolutely essential to the success and power of the learning expedition. Students need not enter this experience interested in rivers, fish, or ecology. For the past three years I have taught this expedition with urban youth, and I have consistently found that observing and caring for the emerging lives will draw students into the expedition. Students respond to the fact that it is their ability to learn new skills and knowledge that will keep these fragile creatures alive and ensure that the salmon will remain healthy and grow until they can be released. I have even found that the experience of having the tank in the classroom has a positive effect on classroom culture and student behavior.

However, as much as I hope that my students will have a lifelong appreciation of anadromous fish and watershed health, the

central goal of the expedition is not to have my students learn a lot about raising salmon. Rather the experience of the tank provides students with a personal connection to the in-depth investigations of biology, chemistry, ecology, and humanities. I feel that the emotional and intellectual investment that students develop in setting up and maintaining the tank gives them the reason to care, to be critical thinkers, to ask questions, and to conduct research on content that is required in the state frameworks.

In developing learning expeditions, educators are always looking for good authentic products. The importance of finding them is made evident to me on the day the students release the salmon fry into the river. Each student receives a cupful of water and fish that they gently lower into the river and watch swim away. All the learning, the exploration, the experiments, and fieldwork come together in this moment. They have had to become scholars in order to complete this work and raise these fish for release.

## CONTENT AND SKILLS

The adventure starts in November when we travel to the fish hatchery in New Hampshire to observe the adults being artificially spawned. This kickoff fieldwork initiates a round of questioning that leads to our first in-depth investigation into life cycles. The real challenge here is what not to include. Contrasts of each student's own life cycle to that of the salmon lead to studies of the life cycles of other living things. Ideally, this expedition is co-taught by a humanities and math/science team, and opportunities exist for the humanities teacher to look back into family trees and origins of students' personal histories. We dive into the specifics of sexual reproduction and discussions of DNA as a mechanism by which characteristics are passed from one generation to the other. In a parallel exploration in sixth-grade world cultures and geography, students study how cultural characteristics are passed from one generation to another in many different societies.

Bridging the study of life cycles and the second in-depth investigation in ecology and earth science, students conduct fieldwork at the spawning bed where we will eventually release our salmon. In order to replicate the natural habitat of the salmon eggs artificially in an incubator tank, students need to become experts in the elements of that environment. This launches curriculum into the area of watersheds, basic ecology, and the hydrological cycle.

This learning expedition offers the opportunity to truly connect math/science teaching with humanities. Our research on rivers begs the question, "Why were the wild salmon eliminated from the Merrimack River watershed?" Students soon become experts in the relationship of humans to these watersheds and how that relationship has changed over time. This directly leads to humanities studies on the industrial revolution in New England, which resulted in the damming of the Merrimack River and its tributaries and therefore the extinction of the salmon.

As students are setting up and maintaining the tank, the question of water becomes increasingly important. Students learn they have to include objects such as filters and air stones in order to replicate the natural environment of the river. Inevitably questions lead to the in-depth investigation of chemistry. In learning about atoms, molecules, and the periodic table of the elements, we answer the question, "Why do we pump air through the water in the tank?" Taking on the roles of protons, neutrons, or electrons, students physically make atoms and then enact various forms of chemical bonding to explain the type of chemistry that is taking place in a tank. We draw original pictures of oxygen atoms being bounced around by water molecules as they become dissolved and circulated throughout the tank. Students conduct controlled experiments around solubility and create drawings explaining how the polar molecule water can break

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*I feel that the emotional and intellectual investment that students develop in setting up and maintaining the tank gives them the reason to care, to be critical thinkers, to ask questions, and to conduct research on content that is required in the state frameworks.*

*A Reason to Learn, continued from page 7*

the ionic bond of salts.

My students investment in the content, and the probability that they will remember what they are learning, is so much increased because they are able to connect that solubility lab back to what they need to know to understand our salmon tank. They must become chemists in order to answer their own questions and acquire the knowledge necessary to maintaining the tank environment.

A wonderful thing about salmon eggs is their translucent nature. Once a week we pull a salmon egg out of the tank—and later a hatched, partially-developed young called alevin. I put it under a magnifying camera, and project the image on the wall. This allows me to take an egg the size of a pea and enlarge it to the size of a volleyball. Even my most cynical students can be heard gasping on the day when we realize that the motion beneath the head of the newly hatched transparent alevin is actually the expansion and contraction of the primitive two-chambered heart of the developing fish. We can actually see a small spurt of blood being expelled from the heart into the artery as the muscle contracts. These weekly drawings become our motivation to get out on the banks of the river once again and explore anatomy, organs, and organ systems.


Throughout the entire salmon learning expedition, I try to find ways to introduce new skills. There is a strong literacy component. Opportunities for creative writing abound, but I have particularly used this learning expedition as an opportunity to teach a comprehensive and highly-structured expository writing and comprehension curriculum. By the end, students have a defined set of strategies for outlining and creating expository text. Students use many of the same tools to record their field notes, conduct research, and increase their comprehension. Technology is infused throughout this process.

#### LESSONS LEARNED

I will always remember a particular student

*They must become chemists in order to answer their own questions and acquire the knowledge to maintain the tank environment.*

who experienced significant academic struggles but was an excellent artist and loved to draw. It was the consistent and important role of artwork and drawing that allowed him to explore and become fascinated with the content of the salmon expedition. He would arrive at school early so he could be there to feed the fish. This interest and excitement helped sustain him through the many areas that were challenging for him.

Thus I use the natural emotional investment and curiosity that arise out of a central experience of an expedition to create the impetus and motivation to explore in-depth content and develop skills. The same student who would never take the time to read the tedious directions to learn how to do a dissolved oxygen test in a traditional classroom will pursue quality in earnest because she knows that understanding dissolved oxygen has something to do with these tiny vibrant lives she has come to care about. Create a powerful learning experience in the classroom, and students will harness that power to explore, driven by their own will, the same places that state frameworks and textbooks try to force them to go kicking and screaming. 

*Christopher Koerber is director of curriculum at the Willauer School on Thompson Island in Boston, Massachusetts. He developed this expedition at the former Lynn Community Charter School in Lynn, Massachusetts. He can be reached at [ckoerber@thompsonisland.org](mailto:ckoerber@thompsonisland.org).*

## Building Background Knowledge

# Children as Experts:

## TAPPING EVEN THE MOST RELUCTANT READERS

BY ANA GUERRA-WAUTERS

“Wow, I didn’t know there were so many kinds of cockroaches,” exclaimed Jeremy.

“Let me tell you about how termites can eat so much,” Tyrone volunteered.


“Do you know the weight of the heaviest insect?” asked Keisha.

Fourth-grade students at Glen Avenue Elementary School in Salisbury, Maryland bombarded me with many enthusiastic remarks as they participated in a community share-out at the end of a workshop designed to increase background knowledge of insects (see description of building background workshop on pages 10-11).

During the early stages of the workshop, the students worked in small groups and shared what they collectively knew about insects. They read an article that supplied additional perspectives and information. I then gave each group an assortment of expert texts that captured their interest and curiosity about insects. The selection of these texts varied from sketches of insects with labeled body parts, fact sheets on insects, a children’s magazine article on cockroaches, a description of termites as terminators, and a short article concerning a farmer’s battle with insects. I took the time to find materials that would interest students at a variety of reading levels, which allowed the students to participate and not be held back. With this array of materials available, those students that I had in the past seen as hesitant to engage in reading activities were now participating actively in their group.

Each time I pass out the expert texts to a group of students, I always like to watch their

selection process. At Glen Avenue, some students grabbed the diagramed sketches of insects to find out the names of each body part. Other students were attracted to a particularly snappy headline such as, “Voracious Eating Machine.” Still others gravitated toward the colorful drawings of insects.

Giving students this unique opportunity to self-select their reading choice motivates even the most reluctant reader. At the same time, I tell the students that they have the responsibility to become an expert on whatever texts they have chosen. As experts, each child then has to include this new information onto a web, which their group creates together to document the new information they have learned about insects. It is this free choice and responsibility to their group that makes students so enthusiastic about their work. Through the effective organization of the building schema workshop, students are able to get a great deal of research done without a teacher resorting to a lecture format or use of standard worksheets. My work with these particular Glen Avenue students will continue as I now have a new assignment. One student has asked me for help finding articles on eating bugs! 

*Ana Guerra is a school designer with Expeditionary Learning. She can be reached at [ana@elob.org](mailto:ana@elob.org).*

This lynx was drawn by Brandon Ganske, a fourth grader at Pocatello Community Charter School in Pocatello, Idaho, for an expedition on Yellowstone National Park.



## Building Background Knowledge

# Content Immersion: INSPIRING STUDENTS TO BECOME EXPERTS

BY JEANNE ANDERSON

How can we inspire students' curiosity in a topic? How do we motivate students to actively research that topic, and how can we whet the appetite for an expedition topic? Building background knowledge workshops can be used to inspire discussion and collaboration on expedition topics or on more detailed content throughout the expedition. They spark new ideas and cause students to wonder and ask questions. They are not meant to contain the entire expedition, but serve to develop a road map. The workshop demonstrates how quickly participants, students or teachers, can become

steeped in a topic, build background knowledge, and use that knowledge to become better-informed readers of difficult text.

When I am in the process of developing a building background knowledge workshop, I know it will be successful when I find myself engrossed in the topic, spending hours searching for original documents in libraries or perusing children's books in bookshops. If I feel passionate about the topic, invariably the children will as well. In my research, I make a special effort to find an evocative, powerful mystery text (see Building Background Knowledge Workshop sidebar below).

The mystery *text* is the initial poem, short essay, audio clip, historical document, or excerpt the teacher reads at the beginning of the workshop. It is important that this particular text covers various aspects of the topic that will evoke questions, thus the mystery. Are there unanswered questions and clear gaps where bridges to understanding will need to be built? Do students lack the sophistication to truly make connections or will the bridges to knowledge be met with some investigating?

How do you go about considering whether or not the *mystery text* is generative? In other words, does the text contain a rich array of directions in which the topic can evolve and can those in turn be used to make genuine meaningful connections to students' lives?

In looking for a mystery text to introduce, I consider the elements of the era, including music, writers, artists, geography, and culture as they relate to progress. I have conducted the workshop with a sophomore English class studying Langston Hughes and other writers of that

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### BUILDING BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE WORKSHOP

- ~ Assemble students in groups of four to five.
- ~ Read the *mystery text* aloud. Students write what they think it is about.
- ~ Introduce topic. Students write what they know about the topic. Students share within their group, and one student records their contributions in a web format in black.
- ~ Distribute *provocative text*. Ask all students to read it, coding with *N*, for *new* information. The recorder adds new knowledge in red.
- ~ Distribute a set of *expert texts* to each group. Each student reads/analyzes text.
- ~ Share expert texts in group. The recorder adds knowledge to web in green.
- ~ Reread mystery piece.
- ~ Each group posts and shares their chart.
- ~ Begin charting questions group would like to explore.
- ~ Debrief the process.

*For a more complete version of this workshop please visit our website.*

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They took the road in Waycross, Georgia	First heard in the villages of	Johnson/Joe Louis/Sugar Ray is doing
Skipped over the tracks in East St. Louis	Ghana/Mali/Senegal	with our
Took the bus from Holly Springs	Calls and songs and shouts	Hopes
Hitched a ride from Gee's Bend	Heavyhearted tambourine rhythms	Jive and Jehovah artists
Took the long way through Memphis	Loosed in the hard city	Lay out the human canvas
The third deck down from Trinidad	Like a scream torn from the throat	The mood indigo
A wrench of heart from Goree Island	Of an ancient clarinet	A chorus of summer herbs
wrench of heart from Goree Island	A new sound, raucous and sassy	Of mangoes and bar-b-que
To a place called Harlem	Cascading over the asphalt village	Of perfumed sisters
Harlem was a promise	Breaking against the black sky over	Hip strutting past fried fish joints on
Of a better life, of a place where a man	1-2-5 Street	Lenox Avenue in steamy August
didn't	Announcing hallelujah	Listening for the coming of the blues
Have to know his place	Rifting past resolution	A weary blues that Langston knew
Simply because he was	From streets that know to be	And Counteesung
Black	Mourning still as a lone radio tells us how	<i>Excerpt from Walter Dean Meyers'</i>
They brought a call, a song	Jack	<i>poem, Harlem</i>

era, as well as with fifth-grade students completing a study on the Harlem Renaissance.


I have used *Harlem*, a children's picture book based on a poem by Walter Dean Meyers as the mystery text for an expedition on the Harlem Renaissance (see excerpt above). As a facilitator, I deconstruct the document, and find supporting text that clarifies the meaning of these questions or mysteries, noting the elements.

What questions might the students have after reading this mystery text? For instance, what is the significance of the geography: Trinidad, Goree Island, or Holly Springs? Throughout the poem there is a strong reference to music, why? Anticipating such questions will be the teacher's job when looking for both the provocative and expert texts.

In building background knowledge workshops, all students read a provocative text, which is an article, narrative, or essay that is interesting, thought provoking, and if possible, offer multiple perspectives on the topic. This broad article serves as a net that is cast to cover the big ideas of the mystery text.

The expert texts can include a number of

sources. Consider a variety of four to five of the following: political cartoons, art work or other drawings, short biographies, novel excerpts, narratives, timelines, photos, artifacts, and short audio or video clips. Think in terms of the details that can be brought out through each piece. Do they help to unfold the mystery? For example, in the Harlem Renaissance workshop, I include a map of Harlem that shows the relationship of Lenox Avenue, 110th Street, 125th Street, and the A train.

I spread these collections among the group of three to five participants, and each member selects a text and becomes an expert in the area of their choosing. All members of the group are responsible for promoting listening, determining importance, making connections, and synthesizing the information. As a result of this accountability, students become more invested in their own learning, understand themselves better, and improve their reading comprehension. 

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*Compelling expedition topics take content standards that need to be taught, and reshape and organize them in order to make them engaging and accessible to students.*

*Compelling Expedition Topics, continued from page 3*

depth investigation led students to the content and skills that they needed to master for their grade level, but did so in a way that engaged the students and created the “need-to-know.”

In a third example, the focus of inquiry concerns recent history: McCarthyism and Civil Rights (see sidebar on page 3). The in-depth investigations include Haley Ferguson and the National Theatre Project, Dalton Trumbo and the Hollywood Ten (blacklisted Hollywood writers), the Rosenbergs’ trial, and civil rights, post 9/11. In this case, key players and events provide illuminating ways into the subject of McCarthyism and civil rights. The in-depth investigations lead students to construct a deep understanding of this era of our history and its relevance to issues today. From this in-depth look at players and events, students are inevitably led to broad content commu-

nism, civics, freedom of speech, government, and post-WWII American and European history.

We have discovered that when the focus of inquiry and in-depth investigations are concrete and specific, the combination yields a compelling topic. In this way, compelling topics foster expeditions rich in content and motivate students to become experts, to generalize to big ideas, and to experience how depth leads to breadth. 

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