Building Background Knowledge—Mystery Piece Method

Overview
This protocol demonstrates how quickly participants can become interested in a topic, build background knowledge, and use that background knowledge to become better and more informed readers of hard text. The workshop adapts easily to content in many disciplines and the design of the workshop ensures that all students read, think, and contribute. The workshop is particularly useful in introducing a topic because it fosters curiosity and builds in immediate feedback about learning. The workshop can also be used to help teachers build the necessary background knowledge to create a compelling topic for their expeditions. When conducted and debriefed for educators, the workshop heightens awareness of key instructional and grouping practices.

Choose a Topic
Once you decide on a topic (e.g., wetlands conservation; Chinese Immigration; Tuskegee Airmen), continue to find text as described below.

Grouping
Assign participants to groups of four.

Materials
For each group, collect a set of four different colored markers, a piece of chart paper, loose leaf paper, and texts.

Mystery Text—First Reading
- Choose a relevant poem, political cartoon, photograph, or song
- Make overhead of the chosen text and read it out loud (remove the title if the title gives away the topic)
- Have participants write down what they think the poem is about and draw a line after thoughts are jotted down

Activating and Sharing Background Knowledge
- Ask participants to write what they know about the topic in their journals
- Ask participants, in their small groups, to share what they know about the topic
- Ask participants to create a web or visualization of their collective knowledge and understanding of the topic on a piece of chart paper using just one of the colored markers

Provocative Text
This text should be an article or essay on the topic; this article needs to be interesting and, if possible, a rich narrative that offers multiple perspectives, since all participants will read this article.
- Ask participants to text code the article: N for new information
- Ask participants to add their new knowledge to their web using a different color of marker

Expert Text
This will be a different article on the topic to be handed out to each member of the group. Use a variety of formats or media here (e.g., timelines, photos, short biographies, editorial cartoons, letters to the editor, narratives, songs, portions of a novel).
- Again, ask participants to text-code the article for new information
- After everyone has read, each participant shares new knowledge on chart paper in yet a different colored marker
- Have on hand extra articles, drawings, maps, or photos for those who finish early

Mystery Text—Second Reading
- Read or show the initial text to the group of participants a second time.
- Ask participants to go back to where they had initially written about the poem and then were asked to draw a line; have participants write about the poem again underneath the line.

Debrief
Contrast the first and second readings or showings of the mystery text.
- Ask questions like: "What was it like to hear the poem the second time?" or "What made the experience so different?"
- Ask a general question about what the process was like to read successive articles. Did they know much about the topic before? Had they been curious about the topic? What inspired their curiosity? If workshop is conducted for educators, ask them to generate the steps of the workshop.