



Where do I start? Here's an idea ...

Our primary curriculum demands that students are taught the language forms and features of effective communication, and how to engage with challenging topics.

In the NSW English K-6 Syllabus, Objective A, students will *develop knowledge, understanding and skills in order to communicate through speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing*. (2012 p.16)

From the first days at school, [ENe-1A](#), to the end of [Stage 3](#), our students are expected to respond to and compose spoken texts, with clearly articulated links to the Australian curriculum.

The [general capabilities](#) - *the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours to assist students to live and work successfully in the 21st century* are included.



And we need to value what our students bring to the classroom from the start. Sometimes it's not what we would necessarily prefer. But we need to be able to accommodate them, and build the thinking strategies that will be most helpful to them for their 21st century future.

Activities from the first session on the first day need to establish Alexander's **classroom organisation, climate and relationships** which make all this possible. (<https://www.robinalexander.org.uk/dialogic-teaching/> accessed 19/11/2018 my emphasis).

Here's an idea that works.

The affinity diagram

The Affinity Diagram is a method which can help you gather large amounts of data and organise them into groups or themes based on their relationships. The affinity process is great for grouping data gathered during research or ideas generated during Brainstorms.

<https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/affinity-diagrams-learn-how-to-cluster-and-bundle-ideas-and-facts>

Introducing this process early in the school year will show your new students that you value them and their contribution to the classroom.

It will have broad application across all subjects, and be a useful tool for your students to carry.

Affinity diagrams or clustering exercises are all about bundling and grouping information, and this method can be one of the most valuable methods to employ. For this reason, it is used in many phases of design thinking, as well as outside of the design context.

<https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/affinity-diagrams-learn-how-to-cluster-and-bundle-ideas-and-facts>

The process itself has been used in business for many years. The key to its success is allowing time to fully investigate the issue at hand. Then following up with authenticity.



It is most suitable for analysing and synthesising ideas, and is extremely useful for solving some of those concerns that you feel you have to determine alone, like

- How will we organise our classroom? What do we need to make it work really well?
- Which books do we need to have in our classroom to read?
- Which aspects of the democratic process do we need to investigate?
- What aspects of climate change could we investigate?
- What are we going to do for the assembly item in Week 6?

Example use early in the year:

- planning the layout of the classroom. With the students, identify and code all the elements and features – bookcases, tote tray shelves, formal desks, reading areas, flexible spaces, technology etc. Students work on sheets of A3 paper. Display these around the room. Students examine each of the proposals. They write their feedback on sticky notes. These can be collated into an affinity diagram and discussed. Then for homework, each student draws up their own plan. Parent input is desirable. The conversations students have with them will be very helpful.

I had a 2/3 class one year who had decided we should have a class pet. We went through this process, and it took ages. The students looked at:

- the pros and cons for pets in general
- the pros and cons for having pets in the classroom
- their own experiences with farm and working animals
- their experiences with domestic pets
- ecological concerns like natural habitat and its availability
- allergies and other health concerns
- knowledge of care and feeding
- types of animals in the world
- availability of an environment that was suitable

Suggestions for pets that made illuminating investigation:

- Spiders
- Birds – of all kinds
- Sheep (we were in sheep country)
- Flies
- Giraffes
- Tigers (habitat loss was a big factor in this one)

Texts to support this investigation, included:

- ‘Dear Zoo’, by Rod Campbell (2007) Simon & Schuster
- ‘I want a Pet’, by Lauren Child (2004)
- ‘Rikki-Tikki-Tavi’, by Rudyard Kipling - a short story in the 1894 anthology *The Jungle Book*

These websites offer ideas:

- <https://www.harpercollins.com.au/blog/2017/07/07/14-books-for-doglovers/>
- <https://www.adelaidenow.com.au/entertainment/arts/australias-50-favourite-childrens-books-words-of-magic-to-brighten-kids-lives/news-story/b3e268e06202253b84572700f833cd9e> not all about pets, but some gems, and some other gems – books that we love.

Your school librarian will have a selection of both fiction and non-fiction texts suitable for all grades.

Our final decision was a bit tricky. But the learning, the information and ideas we covered, the valuing contributions from every student and the processes we went through, covered speaking and listening outcomes, and the general capabilities several times over.

And we need to start at the very beginning of the year.
Go for it.



Just remember that commitments need to be honoured. That's part of the deal in establishing your authenticity – one of the characteristics of a trusted teacher.

(I have to admit, I didn't follow through with the pet one. The kids had decided on a giraffe – we had a huge oval and school yard, and there were plenty of farm kids who could have provided hay. We were all a bit disappointed.)

References

Alexander, R. <https://www.robinaalexander.org.uk/dialogic-teaching/> accessed 19/11/2018

The Interaction Design Foundation at <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/affinity-diagrams-learn-how-to-cluster-and-bundle-ideas-and-facts> accessed 4/12/2018