

CASE STUDY 11.2

Judith Kent

A bitter wind blew Andrea Green's coat as she dashed across the Ross School parking lot on a Monday morning early in March. The weather was in sharp contrast to the bright, warm days of fall when she had begun her student teaching at Ross. She had kept in touch with Judith Kent, her cooperating teacher, since completing her student teaching in December and had been delighted when Judith had suggested she return for a visit.

Andrea saw the lights in Judith's classroom and hurried inside, thinking about her mentor. Judith was 45 years old and had been teaching for twenty years, all of them in the Raddison district. Several years previously, the fifth- and sixth-grade teachers at Ross had received permission to departmentalize the curriculum to prepare their students for middle school. Judith taught social studies and language arts to two different classes of fifth-graders, meeting with each for half the day. She rarely taught material the same way twice and was always looking for new and interesting ways to introduce and develop the curriculum.

When Andrea walked into the class, her first words were, "You've rearranged the room." When she was last there, the desks had been in three rows of seven. There had been an additional group of twenty-one chairs arranged in a corner of the large, bright room. That corner had been used for reading and class meetings. Now the twenty-one student desks were arranged in a horseshoe. Judith had a table at the front, facing the class. The table was covered with organized piles of papers, file boxes, and notes. An additional worktable with a supply of colored pencils, blank paper, and baskets for student work stood in the center of the horseshoe.

Judith looked over the room and nodded. "Well, we haven't gotten the corner rug back since the room flooded during the winter break, and that back corner didn't seem right without it. So I thought I'd try this plan for a while."

As they were speaking, students began drifting into the room. Sloan threw her arms around Andrea. "Mrs. Green, you're back, I'm *soooo* glad to see you," she announced dramatically. Ellen and Richard came in, cheeks red with cold, and gave Andrea shy smiles. Robert walked in and headed over to his cubby.

Judith cleared her throat. "Robert, how about 'Good morning, Mrs. Green, how are you today?' We're still going to work on this, aren't we?"

Robert shrugged, mumbled "Good morning" to Andrea, and began to talk to Brian. Andrea was not surprised by Robert. He had never paid much attention to the adults in the room—his main interests were sports and computers.

Students continued drifting in, smiling when they saw Andrea, some stopping to talk, and others heading to a game corner where shouts and laughter could be heard. Judith walked to the front of the room and called to the class, and the students came to their desks.

After quickly dispensing with the early morning routine, Judith told the students to take out their vocabulary workbooks, and she began an introductory lesson to the words for the week. While Judith worked with the class, Andrea prowled the room to see what new projects were displayed. She paused at a change in Judith's voice.

"OK, everybody, it's time to line up for music. When you come back, sit with your partner for social studies."

The students filed out to music class, and Andrea and Judith began to talk as they walked to the teachers' lounge for coffee.

"Andrea, it's a good thing you didn't stop by on Friday. Class was a disaster."

Andrea held open the door of the teachers' lounge. "What happened?"

"I had what I thought was a great idea. I was going to have the kids use their texts and one additional source to plan a descriptive road trip across the Trans-Canada Highway. They were going to go from west to east and write about the physical features, cities, and populations they would see along the way. They had been doing an overview of Canada and its provinces and this seemed like a fun way to put everything together. They had already marked the provinces and general information on large maps of Canada, and for this assignment they were going to mark more detailed physical features on maps of each province as they took their 'trip.' "

Andrea spoke over the rim of her coffee cup. "Sounds good."

"On paper, maybe. They began piling around me with questions minutes after I gave the assignment. They couldn't locate more information on a certain river, or they didn't know where to find out about a city, or they weren't sure how to plot a route." Judith motioned with her hand that the women should take their coffee to the classroom and she held the door for Andrea, but her commentary never faltered. "Even their maps gave them trouble," she continued as they walked through the empty hall. "They couldn't look at the maps in their texts and see that mountains ran all along the coast. They had marked their own maps with one or two mountain symbols and figured that was enough. I thought that our discussions of physical features and the work we did with map keys and symbols would have prepared them for this assignment."

Andrea nodded sympathetically, remembering what a blessing Judith's openness and honesty had been during student teaching. "I would have thought so too. Especially since this is such a bright class."

"Right!" Judith agreed. "And this wasn't high-level stuff we were studying. But my plan for Friday just didn't work at all. They even began to fool around in their teams. They didn't act up at all when they worked on their Indian projects and on their explorer reports, so I knew something wasn't right."

"Did you figure it out?" Andrea preceded Judith into the classroom and sat at a student desk.

“I began to look at the text again, and I realized part of the problem had to do with the layout of the information. On the surface, the text presents the information in the same order as the trip they would take, but so much extraneous information was included in this part of the book that the kids couldn’t extract what they needed. Important material wasn’t in boldface, and too many additional facts were squeezed into each paragraph. The texts try to cram so much in.”

Andrea nodded and said, “You must have been really frustrated. I know how hard you work on the social studies projects. What did you do?”

“I spent the weekend going back through the material, and I’ve written an outline of what they need to look for. With all the steps we’ve taken to learn report writing, I thought they were ready for more independent work, but it’s clear from what happened that I was wrong. So, instead, they’ll do their maps, create a photo collection from the magazines we have, and pull together the facts they’ve collected on the provinces. It looks like there won’t be an elaborate project on this unit. I’ll think of something else for the unit on westward expansion in North America.”

Just then a wave of children rolled into the room. Andrea watched nostalgically as they grabbed textbooks, clipboards, and notes from their desks and then found seats next to their partners.

Judith waited a moment until everyone was settled and looking at her before she spoke. “Everyone open to your paper with the facts about the Plains region. OK, I need you to listen. I asked you to do the five regions of Canada. We did the Western Mountain region together. Now I want you to share the other regions you did. What region was next?” She paused and most kids answered, “The Plains region.”

“How many teams have finished with their facts on the Plains region?” Hands shot up. “Good. The Canadian Shield?” Almost as many hands went up. “Great, then you all should have lots of information to share. Today we’ll do the Plains and tomorrow the Canadian Shield.”

Judith picked up a large sheet of white paper and taped it to the blackboard. Andrea smiled. Judith used large paper a lot, and examples from previous lessons papered the room. Judith turned to the class. “What do we know about the Plains region?”

Tommy raised his hand. “The western part of the Plains is pretty dry.”

Judith asked the class, “Do we accept that?” Several students nodded. “OK, what else do we know?” Judith wrote Tommy’s contribution on the paper and then nodded toward Dustin.

Dustin didn’t raise his hand often and was generally laconic about his work. He didn’t like to stretch himself. Andrea was glad to see him volunteer. “The Plains stretch from the border with the United States to the Arctic Ocean.”

“What does that mean, Dustin?”

“They go in one big area.”

“Are these the same Plains as in the United States?”

“Yes.”

“Are they identical?”

“No, it’s colder in the north.”

Judith nodded and then shifted her gaze to another student to elicit her contribution. Andrea recognized the relaxed, almost loose way in which Judith conducted class discussions. Students raised their hands and Judith nodded in their direction or called on them by name. They discussed climate, resources, and geography, with Judith asking for further definitions when things seemed nonspecific. In the fall, Judith had made a point of calling on students who did not pay attention, and Andrea could see that she still did that, generally letting that student know why. Anita was talking about the Plains being hilly when Judith noticed that Timothy was reading his textbook.

“Timothy, how do they grow stuff if it’s so hilly?” Timothy looked up guiltily. “Timothy, close your book and just listen. Relax, you’ll have time later if you haven’t finished.” Timothy closed his book and sat straighter in his seat.

Melissa raised her hand and rescued Timothy. “The Plains aren’t level.”

Courtney volunteered, “Feedstuffs are grown on grasslands.”

“Oh, there’s Sandra’s great word, *feedstuffs*. We’ll come back to that.” Judith smiled at Courtney but then shifted her gaze.

“Sloan, can you stay tuned in? Give me one important fact to write down.” Sloan flipped through some papers but didn’t answer.

“Did you guys do this section?” Sloan and Eric shook their heads. “I’ll meet with you to get you going,” Judith said quietly and then turned her attention to the class as a whole. “Where are the Plains located? If I needed directions to get there, what are you going to tell me? Anita?”

“They’re in Canada.”

“That’s like telling someone that you can find New York in the United States. How can you be more specific for the Plains? Tiffany?”

Tiffany proudly read her notes. “The southern part borders the United States, and the northern part goes to the Arctic Ocean.”

“Good! If your notes don’t say that, they should.” Tiffany smiled happily. She was classified as learning disabled and went to the resource room every day. Andrea thought she seemed much less sullen than she had in the fall. Judith had told her that Tiffany was happier now that Ellen had also been assigned to the resource room, because the two girls could go together. Tiffany was pretty and very social, but her reading and comprehension skills were below grade level.

Judith and the class rapidly covered other aspects of the Plains region, agreeing on what was important to include on the list of facts on the large paper chart. Judith finished writing and turned back to the class. “A couple of kids got lost as we reviewed this. Take a few minutes later to collect your information on the Canadian Shield so that you know what to expect when we make our list tomorrow.”

Judith paused thoughtfully, and the class quieted quickly in response to her change in mood. “I thought a lot about the assignment I gave you on Friday. I think you were really confused. I reread the textbook and other sources this past weekend. If you were fussing so much in your groups and having a hard time settling down and asking me a zillion questions, then the assignment must have been too hard. I’ve made it clearer with the sheet I’m handing out now. I’ve listed each of the provinces so you can check off each piece of information as you find it in your text and on the map.

“I also noticed that when you put mountains on your maps, you had a hard time drawing in where they begin and end. One little upside-down V doesn’t show that you know where all the mountains go. There’s practically no flat land in British Columbia, and even the valleys are at a high altitude. How do you know how high the land is? Robert?”

“You look at the key.”

“Yes, look for the key on your physical features map and see what altitude the different shades of brown show. The valleys on your maps aren’t going to be white. Let’s get to work on maps or this outline now. Any questions?” Judith stood up, which seemed to signal to the children that they could turn to their partners and begin independent work. Rather than respond to the few raised hands in the large group, Judith walked to students who needed help and dealt with confusion individually. During the next twenty-five minutes or so she toured the room, encouraging and redirecting different student pairs.

Melissa had drawn in scattered mountains with a red pen. She now got out her text and began to examine the key on a map. She walked over to Andrea to ask how to write the altitude on her key for the high valleys. Andrea was glad to be included. They discussed the colors for sea level and higher elevations, and Melissa went to the center table to take some colored pencils.

Judith looked over Sloan’s and Eric’s notes. “You two are disorganized. I want to see all your land region maps—you’ll need your texts, and you’ve got to do your facts for the other regions.” She raised her head and called across the room to Robert, whom she had already reprimanded during the vocabulary lesson. “Robert, if I have to speak to you again for horsing around, you’ll have to work individually for the rest of the project.” Robert stopped. He was working with Sandra, and working alone would have been a real punishment for him.

Judith noticed something on one student’s map and stood erect. She raised the pitch of her voice to command the attention of the whole class. “When you make your symbols for Canadian products, it’s smarter to cut them out and place them on your maps first so they can be moved. Do you think they grow fruit in the tundra? Check it out first and then paste them down.” She glanced down at Tommy and Caren, busily flipping through their text. “I can see that Tommy and Caren know enough to double-check charts when they want to look up products, so their maps are neat.”

Andrea was not surprised to see these two paired up. They were very different personalities but had been friends for several years. Tommy could be irritable, moody, and sarcastic. His writing was often colorful, but he could ramble for pages. In the fall, he had frequently been critical of others and had occasionally made cutting comments to Tiffany. Judith would speak quietly to him, sometimes sending him to work at a desk in the hall or giving him a job to do.

Caren was a quiet, gifted student. She was calm and steady, and always the first girl to join in basketball or baseball games outside. Whenever Judith changed seating arrangements and Tommy ended up away from Caren, complaints from his neighbors always arose. Judith finally just kept them seated near each other and working together when possible.

Judith turned to Amanda, waiting with her hand in the air. "I can't find anything about Alberta, Mrs. Kent."

"Have you looked in the index?" Judith pulled a chair beside Amanda's desk and patiently went through the index of the text with her, explaining how information could often be scattered in different places. Judith constantly tried to reinforce research and organizational skills, knowing it was difficult for students to locate and relate facts that seemed disconnected. This time the focus was Canada, but Andrea knew that Judith's main goals always included gathering and organizing information and synthesizing it in a creative effort.

Judith turned to a page in Amanda's textbook. "Put what you find about Alberta on a page of your notes. Here it talks about how Alberta got its name, and in another paragraph it talks about Banff. Did you write that down?"

Amanda shook her head.

"Then write about Alberta, put down the Banff facts in your notes and on your province map, then go back to the index and look up another page on Alberta." Amanda marked the places with her finger and turned back to her partner, looking relieved.

Andrea was suddenly startled by Timothy's high voice. He sounded angrier by the second. "Jessica!" he yelled. "You don't have anything for this section on your paper yet. What are you *doing*?"

Judith calmly called across the room, "Timothy, cool down." She walked over to him. "Timothy, if you're upset you can always go into the hallway and work on your part. If Jessica doesn't do a good job; it affects *her* grade. She works more slowly, and you have to live with that. Jessica will take her part home if she has to. You're not being fair; things come more quickly to you, and Jessica takes more time. She'll get her part done, but you need to be more patient."

Timothy threw his hands up but didn't say anything more. Jessica stood by quietly, looking stung by Timothy's comments. She was a sweet, smiling girl who seemed more interested in extracurricular activities than school.

Andrea remembered that she did take longer to complete work and that her writing was perfunctory and badly misspelled. Jessica sat down, turned away from Timothy, and began to fiddle with her papers.

Judith turned her attention to another team and gave them suggestions for finding indirect information about Lake Louise. She then walked to the front of the room and raised her voice slightly. “OK, time to finish up and put all work in your folders.” Most students began returning extra texts, colored pencils, and folders to the basket in the center of the room. Judith scanned the room. “Eric, Sloan—finish up.” They too closed their books and began cleaning up.

Judith began to explain the next assignment as the last students returned to their original seats. “Take your journals out now and write today’s date. Take a few minutes to write about any problems or about progress you’ve made. Was it better today than Friday? What’s the most difficult part of this assignment for you? What could be done to make it easier? Write whatever you want to write about the project. After you’ve written about problems and progress or what you liked and didn’t, tell me the good part about working with someone else and the bad part. So, it’s comments about both the materials and the working situation.”

Andrea watched as the class wrote in absolute silence. Judith used journals for many kinds of writing activities, a process that she had begun on the first day of school. She had asked the class to write her a private letter about themselves, telling what they felt good about and what they thought they needed help with.

Judith turned to Jessica. “I think your experience might be more personal today. You might have some things to write about your feelings, given what happened.”

Judith waited about ten minutes and asked if anyone was willing to share an entry. Several students read their entries, and Judith summed up the comments. “So far people value ideas, sharing responsibility, and not griping. Melissa and Courtney really like to work alone because it is sometimes hard to compromise. But you seem to be working it out.” Judith smiled at the two girls who had shared their frustrations with paired projects and then broadened her gaze to include Jessica.

“Jessica, would you like to share?”

Jessica shook her head and stared across the room at Timothy. Judith spoke softly to the class as a whole.

“Almost every time two people start to work together they have to get used to each other. People work differently and at different speeds . . .”

Judith was interrupted by Timothy’s waving hand and frustrated cry. “But we never finish in time, and . . .”

Judith cut him off. “Stop! Does anyone else have a suggestion for them and how they can resolve their different styles?”

“Maybe Jessica can sit separately and do her part and put it with Timothy’s,” Sloan suggested.

Other hands went up. Melissa spoke next. “No, not sit alone, but they should divide the work up so they know who is doing what.”

Richard added his comments. “They can do different things at the same time, and if he finishes first he can help her.”

Robert made a suggestion that Andrea thought was remarkably sensitive for a 10-year-old. “Jessica is good at art—she could do the maps, and he could do the facts.”

Judith interjected. “But Jessica still works slower, even if she’d be doing the map part. She can take her work home to put in the time.”

Timothy jumped in, practically whining, “But I won’t know what she’s going to do; she might mess it up!”

“Timothy, I’m going to ask each of you what *you* did on the project. You each get a grade on what you did,” Judith responded.

Sloan piped up, “Timothy should just worry less.”

Richard agreed. “This is only one thing. You’re putting too much pressure on yourself.”

Judith again summed things up. “OK, this is what I hear. Jessica could concentrate harder and take work home. There are two different grades on the project, and Timothy needs to understand differences in work habits.” She paused and looked around the room. “Why are we doing this project?”

The class gave a variety of responses: to learn about Canada, to enjoy the work instead of answering 8 million worksheet questions, to learn to work together.

“As long as Jessica gets her share done, she can do it any way she wants. You two meet with me to divvy up the work so that you both think it’s fair.” Judith looked at Jessica and Timothy questioningly but received no acknowledgement; Timothy shrugged in irritation, and Jessica slumped further in her seat. Judith, however, moved on. “Let’s get off it now. It’s Dustin’s birthday, and he’s going to pass out cupcakes. While he’s doing that, take out *Witch of Blackbird Pond*, open to page 146. We’re going to assign roles for reading.”

Andrea shook her head—not a moment was wasted, and the class didn’t seem to object. While they picked out their cupcakes, they were busy discussing who was going to read what part. Judith had moved seamlessly into language arts. The class read aloud and discussed characters until lunchtime.

Judith had a lunchtime grade-level meeting and hurried off with a quick good-bye and an invitation for Andrea to come by any time. Andrea joined other teachers she knew for lunch. Later, as she left the building, she peeked into the room where Judith was meeting with her other fifth-grade class. Judith was giving them a different journal entry to begin the class. “Write what you think it means to go into a sealed room to stay. If you don’t know, write that. Then we’ll share and discuss.”

“Was she doing social studies or language arts?” Andrea wondered. She knew that for Judith, that was of little importance.