

# Drowning in a Sea of Information

By Vicki Cobb

Over the years people have asked me where I get my ideas. The easy answer is, “From the same place everyone gets ideas.” But the truth is if I really knew where ideas came from: 1) I’d have more good ones. 2) I might have a Nobel Prize 3) I’d be rich. I can only tell you what I do to get ideas: First, I read other people’s ideas. Then I think. (That usually means I sleep on it and see what pops into my head in the morning.) When I was a teacher there was no time to think. Five classes, 150 students, 3 separate lessons to plan every day did not leave much time for dwelling or mulling. My frustration as a junior high science teacher was that I loved communicating my subject matter to kids but there was no time to make a lesson that was “box-office.” Time to think is a prerequisite for my job as a writer. I try and give you the best I’ve got in this column.

As the curtain goes up on a new season of Show-Biz Science I’ve been fishing (surfing?) for ideas on the internet. When I first went on line, over ten years ago, the world wide web was designed for scientists to communicate with each other. One fascinating nugget led to another as like minds linked their sites. But today! Omigosh! Help! I’m drowning in a sea of information. The first problem is that there is way too much repetition of the same old same old. As someone who has written dozens of science activity books I have been reading experiments for years. (I’m like a cook book author who reads recipes for fun—looking for something truly unique.) It’s hard for me to find one I haven’t heard of. Most sites only list the titles of their activities so I have to click on each one separately to make sure it isn’t something I already know. And everyone simply adds to their sites and never deletes anything. If you’re lucky a large site has its own search engine. Wading through even a single site can take hours. (It’s so much quicker to skim through a book.) But then, time for research is part of my job description.

The second problem is that many of the experiments posted on the web don’t work. When I started writing that complaint was made about science experiment books so I vowed to never include an experiment I hadn’t done. You can be sure that if I find something interesting, I will do it and make sure it works before I pass it on to you. By the way, one of the best ways I get ideas is to do experiments and figure out how to improve on them.

The third problem is that many of the explanations of the activities are incomplete, poorly written, or just plain inaccurate. Manuscripts are read by several editors and are vetted by experts before a publisher puts a book into the marketplace. (Even so errors creep into books.) In the wild west of the www there are no guarantees for accuracy and few editors to make sure the author speaks meaningfully. (EducationWorld is an exception. We have great editors here.)

But the biggest problem is that most of the science activities are not tied to the big ideas in the science curriculum. An experiment should reinforce a concept and make it meaningful within the context of a student’s life. Too many science activities have no

consideration of the “so what!” factor. If the only reason a kid does a science project is to fulfill a homework assignment then we have failed as educators. As teachers, the best way to ensure that your students remember facts to recall on assessment tests is to give them a conceptual framework for those facts.

I guess I’m making an argument for the continued existence of nonfiction books for children. The overwhelming nature of the internet is not serving them well when it comes to learning about science or social studies. The information they get with the click of a mouse is suspect. Please work with your school librarian to enrich your students’ lives with well-crafted stories about the real world that give structure and meaning to the content you’re required to teach. It’s one way to get them above C level.