

Encouraging Student Research

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Ryan is six years old. His teacher at The Little School, Steve Goldenberg, tells this story.

We always have a story-writing time, and at first Ryan wanted to write a history of the whole world and the whole universe, and was having trouble finding the point for starting. I gave him a little structure, which was to have him invent fictitious characters, but have them do real things....

Ryan came up with three characters, Ed, Jake, and Randy, who work at Microsoft, and take vacations together. The first vacation that he wanted them to go on was to Montana, where [Ryan's] grandfather lives. Ryan was most interested in researching how they would get to Montana and was very happy to find maps and to find out what routes people could take to drive from Redmond, Washington, to Montana. Then it became clear that he wanted them to stay in a hotel, and he was very focused on making sure to have them stay on the highest floor of the tallest hotel in Montana.

I asked him, 'How would Ed, Jake, and Randy know which one was the tallest hotel?' and he said he didn't know. He took a trip up to the library at our school, but our librarian was stumped; so I suggested we call a travel agent. He had never heard of a travel agent but was fascinated by the idea of people who knew about places all over the world and might even know how many floors a hotel had.

We called one, in Billings, who at first was kind of skeptical, but then when she

heard it was for a six-year-old student her entire affect changed. She actually didn't know which hotel was, in fact the tallest, but she made it her top priority to find out and get back to us.

Something happened for Ryan.... He started becoming more interested in just trying to find out about things. He wanted to know all of the museums that they could have gone to, what hours they were open, and everything they might see while visiting Montana....

Ryan went on to write a series of five "books" about Ed, Jake, and Randy, who always went traveling together, and who actually did a lot of research. They looked in travel guides and they asked people what it would be like and what people would be doing in the places they were going to travel to.

I have traveled through dozens, if not hundreds of classrooms from the elementary level up through high school during my time as a classroom teacher, mentor teacher, and university professor, and experiences such as Ryan's are increasingly rare. Students are not given the time or room to follow their questions, to research their interests. More often, I see students responding to teacher prompts, or buried in worksheets and textbooks designed to move them closer to passing state exams. There is virtually nothing initiated by students. Their interests, questions, and concerns are worse than irrelevant; they interfere with the forced march required if the class is to get through the curriculum by May, or June, in time for the tests.

This raises serious questions for me as an educator, and as a fellow citizen. I want my students' lives and voices to be central to our work in the classroom. It is crucial to me that they make connections between their experiences and the content we are required to cover. I invite their questions and curiosities into our learning community and structure time so they can pursue those questions that matter most to them so that they will know how to question and to think, but it's increasingly challenging to do so as the testing noose gets tighter and tighter.

I wanted help in learning how to be more effective at supporting my students to learn how to conduct effective research so I interviewed several historians, artists, and educators about the ways in which they carry out their research, and how those researchers who are currently in classrooms help their students to learn and develop these skills. All were clear that they had no magic formula that could be followed by others, but there was significant agreement in what the researchers shared:

- The research experience is most likely to be successful if the researcher cares about the topic, if the research matters to him or her.
- Research takes time. It is imperative that researchers have adequate time to carry out the several steps of the research process.
- The process of pursuing a research question frequently takes research-

ers beyond the boundaries of any one discipline.

- Listening may be *the* key skill in conducting research. This means listening to oneself, first, and then being able to listen to others as the research process unfolds.
- The best research leads to an authentic consequence for the researcher, and for others.
- There are many ways of communicating research findings, and the researcher can choose the most effective means of sharing what they have found, based on what they want to communicate, to whom, and for what purpose.

I will briefly discuss each of these points, bringing the thoughts and experiences of my consultants to the conversation whenever possible.

The research experience is most likely to be successful if the researcher cares about the topic, if the research matters to him or her.

Steve's story about Ryan sums up the most important point made by every one of the researchers I interviewed; the research experience is most rewarding and successful when the researchers find value in what they are doing. Their research must matter to them, and must be of appropriate and sufficient challenge for them at whatever skill and experience level they bring to it.

In Steve's words, "Once students understand that they can research about things they're interested in, they all want to do it, and want to do it passionately."

Poet Georgia Heard talked about her own young son's approach to learning, linking it to a speech made by the Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska when she accepted the Nobel Prize for poetry. Part of Szymborska's speech was about why she values the phrase "I don't know," so highly.

... If Isaac Newton had never said to himself "I don't know," the apples in his little orchard might have dropped to the ground like hailstones and at best he would have stooped to pick them up and gobble them with gusto. Had my compatriot Marie Sklodowska-Curie never said to herself "I don't know," she probably would have wound up teaching chemistry at some private high school for young ladies from good families, and would have ended her days performing this otherwise perfectly respectable job. But she kept on saying "I don't know," and these words led her, not just once but twice, to Stockholm, where restless, questing spirits are occasionally rewarded with the Nobel Prize. Poets, if they're genuine, must also keep repeating, "I don't know." Each poem marks an effort to answer this statement...

Georgia Heard continues.

So often in schools we try to cover up that we don't know. I think that's what a child's world is. I think about my son Leo. He wants to know how the world works, and his question is "I don't know," and that's where his passion for learning comes from, not from being filled up by a curriculum that someone else has just invented.

When students engage in work that they value, they learn that research is rewarding; it helps them to find out what they want to know, and it generates its own life and excitement. They learn that their own questions and curiosities are legitimate. This is the basis for life long learning.

Author and educator Jan Maher expands on this point.

Way too often in classrooms we don't help students see the connections

between what we hope they will learn and what matters to them.... If we can engage them in asking authentic questions that they are really interested in knowing the answers to, they will learn that this work has real value for them.

The alternative would be for the students to learn that their questions and interests don't matter, and that the only point of an assignment is to complete it to the teacher's, or the state's, satisfaction. There is no quicker way to smother curiosity and defuse creativity than to dictate to students what they will or will not investigate, and then to tell them whether they have been successful or not.

Research takes time and crosses discipline boundaries

The design of the school day often makes it seem as if the things of the world belong to certain categories or disciplines. Each discipline develops its own learning sequence, curricula, and assessments, and there is little attempt to integrate or coordinate with other disciplines. This is a bureaucratic, organizational decision that is not the way the real world works. We don't go out and have a "social studies," experience. We live in the world, and use as many lenses and ways of understanding as we can to make sense of what we experience. There's a difference.

What matters are the questions: What do we want to know and what can help us to find out? How can we begin to answer our questions? Skilled researchers are masters at following the threads, wherever they lead. They pose their questions and then pursue them until they have fully responded to the questions, or until they have been stopped, by lack of time, resources, or access.

Georgia Heard talks about her own work, as a poet and a researcher.

... I think that I definitely "follow the thread," as William Stafford named it.... When researching about Vietnam I found out my father was

in the Têt offensive in Saigon... I found out that Têt is a holy holiday, so then I wanted to find out about Têt, from the Vietnamese perspective, and how important it is to them. So I had all these various threads that would come up, and it was based on a passion. I wanted to know.

Historian Howard Zinn put it this way:

From the beginning, I decided that I would go wherever an issue took me. The important thing to me was, "Here's a question to be solved." If there's a question to be solved you mustn't limit yourself to one particular field in trying to solve that question. If you have to go into economics, go into politics, if you have to go into genetics and geography, whatever, you just go wherever the question leads you.

The act of research, of asking questions about our world and pursuing them with the goal of understanding, is the deep work of the social studies. The motivation behind the work of Howard Zinn or Georgia Heard is no different than that which motivates Steve Goldenberg's young students; they want to know, and they organize their efforts so that they can form as complete and accurate a picture as possible. This effort takes time, and it often leads the researcher into unexpected corners.

Listening may be the key skill in conducting research

Listening means you are actively taking in people's stories, listening for the ways in which bias and point of view may have shaped what you are hearing, or not hearing. You are learning to engage in critical thinking, in analysis of what you are hearing, not as a passive "ear," but as an engaged listener.

Howard Zinn said that he'd started out by asking, "What are the points of view that are omitted in any traditional telling of history?" as he was researching and

writing *A People's History of the United States*. That orientation led him to "look into the shadowy parts of the library," he said, to include voices and points of view that had been consistently marginalized or left out of U.S. history.

The importance of listening is one of the reasons that Wendy Ewbank has her middle school students carry out research via interviews and oral histories.

One of my students was investigating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She came to me one day and said, "I was interviewing this woman and, you know, I think she is really biased. She's an Israeli woman and talked about terrorism and Palestinians. The student could see that this woman was coming from a particular perspective and she needed more interviews because if she simply went with what the woman said it would be clearly one sided."

Wendy concludes: "Her experience working with a real person was worth a week of lessons, or more. That's why you do it."

The best research leads to an authentic consequence

Those I interviewed all engage in research related to better understanding who we are and how we came to be this way, and there is an intention to take action based on their findings, to communicate to others.

High school teacher Gary Thomsen designs his curriculum so that there are authentic consequences for his students, and also for the community.

Number one is teaching transferable skills that are going to benefit them down the road... Plus, personally, I think experiential learning is where you can have the most impact on the kids, and in turn, where they reap the most benefit. Communication skills in particular are hugely critical if you want to achieve success, in any field,

and these types of projects require tremendous amounts of written and verbal communication.

There are many ways to share the results of research

Schools have traditionally favored structured research assignments resulting in structured written reports, with a vague sense that the teacher would be reading the papers. There is rarely any authentic purpose to the work beyond carrying it out, handing it in, receiving a grade, and checking it off the list of requirements. If we are looking to involve students in meaningful work then we would do well to encourage them to think differently about the consequences of their efforts, and the impact they want to have on those who come to it. Researchers communicate what they have learned about topics through a wide range of modes that they choose for a number of reasons. They consider what they have to say, to whom they would like to say it, and the impact/response they are hoping to have on those who experience their work. The researchers also consider their own strengths, resources, and preferences for communication.

Don Fels, talking about the installations he creates, says "I think part of the function of art is to get people to experience their world more fully...so, you have to do something that gets people to see things differently."

Artist Roger Shimomura says: "I really meant to establish a forum for examining racism and injustice with this other series of paintings, Stereotypes and Admonitions... There's a certain advantage to having something sit on the wall... and to keep sending those sparks out for whoever may look at it."

What it comes to, finally, is making the decision as to what our purpose is as educators. Why are we doing what we are doing, what do we want for our students, and what do we believe is important for them to gain in their time with us? I want students to be excited about learning, and to gain skills and confidence

in their ability to pose and answer their own questions. I want students to think critically about what they encounter, and to have the skills and confidence to question what they read, hear, or view, and to research their questions. I want students who are motivated to act on what they have learned, to become engaged citizens working on their own behalf, and on behalf of their communities.

This won't happen on its own. It's up to me to organize my classroom, my curricula, and schedule so that it does happen. I have to invite the students in and make them an offer they won't refuse. I have to work with them to create a learning community such that we get excited together about "making meaning." We will help each other to think critically, to ask questions, to challenge assumptions, and to dig more deeply into stories—whether they are about local, national or international issues.

I will close this piece with a story about what happened in my social studies methods class at Plattsburgh State during a hijacking incident off the coast of Somalia in the spring of 2009. The captain of the hijacked ship, who was being held hostage by "Somali pirates," was from a nearby town in Vermont and so the story was in the local (as well as national) media, and students had questions about what was happening and why.

I began class by asking my university students if any of them wanted to join me on an expedition to hijack a ship. Look at what is happening in Somalia, I prodded. We could "make some good money." They looked at me somewhat blankly, knowing I couldn't be serious, so I pushed on. "C'mon, tuition is increasing ... and jobs are tight. You can miss one soccer game; you can study on the drive to the coast. You can party after we've taken the ship. I've got a plan." When they still sat silently, I asked them why they wouldn't go with me. They gave the expected responses; it's wrong, illegal, dangerous; we'd get thrown in jail; our parents wouldn't let us. So why, I wondered out loud, would a group of Somali teenagers choose to hijack a huge ship and

hold its crew for ransom? Did that make any sense? My students admitted that they had not given it much thought, partly because news stories simply referred to the hijackers as "pirates," calling up images from the movies they had seen, the books they had read. They hadn't thought of the hijackers as teenagers, as their peers.

The conventional media reduced the story to Somali pirates and the Westerners who became their captives; no history, no context, no attempt at understanding the background to what was happening. The people of Somalia are suffering from decades of theft, war, and drought. The children of Somalia have little to look forward to beyond an impossible struggle to survive. But that's not the story that reached my students, or the people who followed the "hijacking" story in the U.S. press. My students knew little more than what they heard on the news.

Without a more in-depth study of the phenomenon, it is easy to fall into racist stereotypes reflected in superficial reporting, "They're different than us; they're evil; they don't value life like we do." And a public trained in schools to do what they are told, whether it makes sense or not—to answer questions at the back of the chapter, to fill in the bubbles with a number two pencil, to ignore their own questions, interests, and experience—accepted the media account without question. That's not good enough. If we don't teach our students to look beyond the surface of stories for the underlying truth, we are failing them as educators.

Once my students realized the "pirates" were young people like themselves, they began to ask "why" in a different way. I offered them articles such as "We're Being Lied to about Pirates," by Johann Hari (first published in *The Independent*, UK, and republished on *Alternet.org*, April 13, 2009), which provided some historical context about the hijackings. The students learned about Somalia's history; about colonization, and about how colonial nations had pillaged Somalia's wealth and natural resources for decades;

about the wars and drought that had left the Somali people in desperate straits; about many countries dumping their nuclear waste into the waters off the Somali coast, ongoing since the Somali government virtually disappeared in the very early 1990s; and about the over-fishing of those same waters by other countries, threatening the one natural resource the Somali people had left to them. And the students came to understand that while the hijackers were only a small, vigilante group of young men, acting on their own, there were people in Somalia who viewed the pirates as heroes, serving as a kind of unofficial coast guard against the illegal incursions made by others into their waters.

Students came to understand, which is different from condoning, the actions of the hijackers, and learned the importance of placing current and historical events within a deeper and more complex context—to work to understand the "why" behind such events. They learned to look behind and beyond the headlines and simplistic paragraphs they found in their texts, and to begin to identify voices and points of view that were not represented. Most importantly, my university students learned that their responsibility as future social studies educators is to encourage and equip their students to pursue their own questions, concerns, and topics as deeply and completely as possible, to think critically and analytically about what they encounter, and to approach their work with a focus on making meaning, on learning about their world so that they are able to act responsibly, for themselves and for others. 📖

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