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**Teaching and Learning Task: Alternative Research Paper**

**Background**

In mid-January, a message from *Edutopia News* appeared in my inbox. After a quick glance I was lured, once again, into personalized professional development via another Google-searching odyssey. One link led to another until I came across a comment from a veteran teacher asking an author of a particular post how to hop aboard the PBL bandwagon. Another respondent, Kate Petty, an English teacher from Orange County in Southern California, was gracious enough to invite that teacher to visit her site and glean anything she so wished. I took that comment as an open invitation as well and was soon visiting and revisiting Ms. Petty’s website <http://www.thetechclassroom.com/>. Here I learned about an alternative approach to reading and research called the Saturation Research Project. Ms. Petty credited Carol Booth Olson, Director of the UCI/National Writing Project and an Associate Professor in the Department of Education at the University of California, Irvine, for this assignment, and after a couple of Google searches, I found that Olson explained the steps of this project in her publication *The Reading/Writing Connection: Strategies for Teaching and Learning in the Secondary Classroom* (Second Edition). I promptly ordered the book and began implementing the first phase of research while I anticipated the blessed delivery of the text. I should also note that I contacted Ms. Petty thanking her for her willingness to share her materials. (I was surprised to receive a prompt reply, an answer to a query I shared, and an invitation to collaborate on a rubric for an assignment!)

**The Assignment Prompt**

Students were introduced to the idea for their research paper and asked to think of topics over the three-day weekend (Martin Luther King, Jr., recognition) in the following way:

What is a historical decision or an historical event that piques your curiosity?

Upon their return from the long weekend, they were given a fully detailed worksheet that included the following formal prompt:

*Choose an event you can saturate yourself in through library and on-line research (and firsthand sources, if available). Dramatize the event by becoming a witness to the event and speaking through his or her voice. Weave together factual information with fictional techniques and use your best speculative and reflective thinking to bring history to life. Your goal is to create a “You are there” feeling in the reader.*

**The Researching, Reading, and Writing Process: Teacher Reflection**

Watching students work through their “productive struggle” has been the crowning achievement of this literacy journey. Were my students excited to work on their projects? Maybe just a handful, but they weren’t crazy enough to voice their enthusiasm in front of their peers! Were my students actively involved in their work? The vast majority was highly invested in their self-selected topics, and I made sure to reassure and praise them regularly for their efforts during the first couple of weeks. For example, it was as soon as the second writing task of the project, an assignment that should have been a quick bellringer, when I observed students stop writing, open their laptops, and begin the “re” researching process without my prompting. The majority of students realized they did not know enough about their topic to begin—let alone complete—a brief assignment. I was amazed (and proud) of their intrinsic motivation to seek the facts and dig deeper, and for that, I praised them and allowed that bellringer to continue for nearly three-quarters of the class period. Learning was happening; learning time had to be accommodated.

From that point forward students asked more questions about their work. The questions students asked have shown me how much they understand the facts of their topics, how well they can conduct internet research and identify credible websites, how little they understand anything from punctuation to citing sources, and, of course, by the second week, whether they had any idea what to choose as a topic. More importantly, however, there have been a couple of moments when I recognized how poorly I had prepared my students for different phases of the project, and those lapses were corrected promptly.

**Assessment Time**

From an assessment standpoint, I am assured that authentic learning has occurred. It is no easy task for a tenth grader to read documents containing legal terms and abbreviations or filled with lengthy and “dry” paragraphs. For students to understand informational material and then transform it into fictional narrative and dialogue is akin to asking them to relate their findings in a different language. It requires a true absorption and sharing of knowledge; it prevents the usual taking and reprinting of found material. Students quickly discover the internet will not have ready-for-the-taking drafts they can pass off as their own work.

Watching students understand how to shift from an informational stance to a creative one has been challenging and at times very frustrating for them. However, it has been refreshing to watch a handful of students just go for it and become risk-taking leaders in the classroom. To see them take the plunge into historical fiction writing has been a necessary escape from the typical argumentative and informational tasks they expect—and desire—to complete. Students who were used to having their hands held have learned to work independently. The expressions conveyed on my students’ faces were indicators that the gears were grinding, sometimes slowing to a near halt before the coals were stoked and their mental wheels were rolling again. I am sure several students have wanted to give up at some point, but luckily, none of them have whined about their projects (at least not in my presence!), and only two students (partners) have asked too late in the process if they can change their topics.

**Follow-Up**

Upon completion of their papers (turning in their historical fiction stories) students will complete a learning log of their process and product.

Students will then create iMovies to present their information in the form of an informational documentary on their subject.