

Emerging Inquiry:

Using Nonfiction to Guide Student Research

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“Ms. Phillips, when are we gonna start a war?”

My students were longing to get lost in the action and adventure of the Revolutionary War and Civil War. Listing geographical facts about the six regions of South Carolina or describing extinct Native American tribes brought exasperated sighs and rolling eyes no matter how I tried to engage students. Looking out at the painfully bored faces in my classroom, I found myself wondering if these nine-year-olds could ever find South Carolina history interesting when the topics (ranging from colonial South Carolina, to the textile mills of the Industrial Age, to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s) were so far from their own experience.

Children in my third-grade class come from low-income families, many from Hispanic and Russian backgrounds. Life experiences had not yet connected them from South Carolina history, causing them to dread the subject. Considering their perspective, I didn't like relying on the textbook as the primary source of information. Students didn't respond to being bombarded with facts in a context that held no immediate relevance to them.

First Attempt

I made several attempts to liven up my approach by using multi-media and primary sources to teach basic American history. Yet, student interest fizzled when we moved on to specific topics such as South Carolina explorers and Native American tribes. The limited resources available did not help. When I implemented research as an activity, my students were baffled by the process. They turned in incomplete projects at the end of the unit and scribbled incorrect answers on tests. Students occasionally had questions about the events that make up our state's history, but there were limited opportunities within my lessons for time to investigate those questions.

Frustrated, I wanted to find ways to engage students in learning opportunities they found valuable and achievable at their level. I wanted them to do well on the summative assessments, but also to feel some connection between events and people in the past and their own experiences today.

Planning for Inquiry

I wondered if a unit based on student interests would help students find meaning in their study of South Carolina's Native Americans. I decided to integrate content area information, literacy practices, and student-led research to actively engage my students in the social studies curriculum.

In an inquiry-based classroom, student interest is at the heart of curriculum planning, instruction, and assessment.¹ Students are responsible for asking questions, using sources effectively to discover answers, and deciding what format would best present their findings. Aside from creating a sense of ownership, inquiry in the classroom engages students with important ideas, creates opportunities to integrate literacy into content areas, promotes critical thinking skills, helps students actively construct new knowledge, and allows for more in depth coverage of content area material.² With these guidelines in mind, I began planning the unit on Native Americans of South Carolina that would place students' questions at the center of instruction.

Second Attempt

To begin our South Carolina Native American study, students brainstormed a list of questions. Their initial questions included:

- “What did the Native Americans do for fun?”
- “Did the Native Americans play sports?”
- “What did the Native Americans eat?”
- “What was the Cherokee culture like?”
- “Where did the Native Americans live?”

Students then found resources to research their questions and attempted to compile their learning in a presentation. They were expected to use the textbook, non-fiction texts I collected from the school library and websites as tools for their searches. I focused primarily on acquiring books that provided fact based information in a format easily accessible to the students in my classroom.

But there were still problems. Students did not know how to use tools such as indexes, tables of contents, and key words to

find applicable information. They flipped absentmindedly through irrelevant chapters becoming more irritated with the time it took to find information.

Similarly, students found navigation of the internet troublesome when they visited the preapproved websites I provided yet weren't directly routed to useful information for their search. Often during research periods, instead of working independently, they peppered me with complaints about not being able to find the answers they were seeking.

Again, I stepped back and evaluated my approach to these lessons. I had convinced myself that true implementation of this strategy meant student control of all aspects of inquiry and little, if any, teacher intervention. But this was not working. As a result of my misinterpretation of the steps for using inquiry, students found this unit confusing and burdensome.

A Different Approach

Despite the struggles we faced in the Native American unit, my students had begun to view history as a story they could investigate. Students perceived non-fiction books in our school library as tools for answering their questions. They were excited they could explore books that focused on the topics they thought were important and went into the depth they craved.

Our next topic, "Explorers in the Southeast," presented a new challenge: no book in the library had this specific topic in its title. Frustrated with the apparent absence of materials, my students developed a plan. They would find other sources of information, research these explorers and what they did, and then write their own non-fiction reports about the men who explored our state to add to our school's library. Impressed with their decisiveness and thrilled to have the chance to integrate inquiry into the classroom again, I joined them in their campaign to become "historical researchers and authors."

As I read more about the inquiry method of teaching, it became clear to me that teachers should take the lead when introducing inquiry, helping students develop the necessary skills. Teachers need to explicitly show students how to develop questions, plan research strategies, and write in a variety of genres to present their findings.³ Learning from our previous unit on Native Americans, I was able to plan our unit on exploration focusing on guiding students through the use of resources and providing them with a model for non-fiction writing. While still focusing on student interest, I planned a unit in which I would guide students in their effort to be researchers. I provided step-by-step guidance in their search for answers, coached them in small research groups, and collaborated with them to plan the final presentation.

Explorers

Our unit, "South Carolina Exploration," centered on the names of the explorers who visited our state, the people and places they encountered, and the lasting effects of their

exploration. This information was new to my students, and I worried that any introduction I provided would hinder their inquisitiveness. However, I learned that it is important for teachers beginning an inquiry unit to provide students with the necessary background knowledge to create questions regarding a particular subject.⁴

Realizing the need to introduce the topic more thoroughly, I searched our school's library and gathered the few texts about exploration that were available. Armed with a handful of books, I built up our (temporary) classroom collection of non-fiction. I scoured the Internet in search of websites that would provide information on explorers that could be applicable to our task at hand. I engaged students in readings of historical fiction for youth that dealt with the topic of exploration and its impact on the development of new lands. After reading these sources, students began to ask questions:

"Why did explorers leave their homes to go somewhere new?"

"What did the explorers do when they got here?"

"Who did they bring with them?"

"How did they get here?"

These questions moved beyond the superficial inquiries students posed in the Native American unit. Students were more interested in the motives for exploration instead of the lifestyles of the men and women who came to our state. Sparked by genuine student curiosity, these deeper questions served as the catalyst for our research.

Planning for Our Mission

Our class time was divided into whole-group, small-group, and individual sessions. Each day, students participated in a whole-group meeting where they were able to share questions they had about the explorers in our state. These were kept in an ongoing list that reminded us of our goals during research. After the list was created, students were asked to choose Hernando De Soto, Jean Ribault, Henry Woodward, William Hilton, or Juan Pardo as the explorer for their research. They divided into collaborative groups based on their choices allowing them to discuss ongoing research, practice research methods presented in class, and serve as peer tutors.

These groups met daily for forty-five minutes for two weeks. Each meeting began with direct instruction on how to find information using the available resources. These mini-lessons covered the topics of choosing a non-fiction text pertinent to a topic, using an index to find exact page numbers dealing with the topics being researched, using the table of contents to find general chapters that dealt with relevant information, and using multiple sources as research tools when one source did not provide enough information. Presentation strategies for this period ranged from direct instruction that used a non-fiction text to answer a student's question to student discussion about effective research strategies they've used.

Digging In

After the mini-lesson, students broke into groups and proceeded to implement research strategies to find their answers. Students worked with non-fiction materials including the social studies textbook, books about general exploration from our school library, travel brochures from our state, and pre-approved web-sites. They moved beyond biographical information and found information about explorers' ships and the environments they encountered in the South. Emily, an avid writer, was particularly interested in the habitats explorers encountered when they landed on the South Carolina coast. Her interests were expressed in her writing through her use of vivid language: "Imagine you were an explorer who just came to South Carolina. You would feel soft gritty sand, and cracking, crunching seashells."

From these emerging interests, students began doing research on their own, bringing in magazines that showed diagrams of explorers' ships, finding pictures in non-fiction books they could connect to exploration, and using a variety of maps to determine the terrain explorers navigated in the New World. One morning, Karen, a child who usually avoided any kind of reading, brought in a magazine and exclaimed, "Look! Ms. Phillips, this is a ship the explorers sailed on. See? I read this caption and it says it's a picture of a ship that Christopher Columbus might have used!"

As students worked during the independent period, I observed and noted difficulties they had as well as the way they dealt with those difficulties. I also used this time to incorporate small-group instruction on effective research strategies. Groups would pose questions they had about the research process and we worked together to find solutions.

Exemplary Efforts

After our research period, the class reconvened, and we discussed some exemplary student work. While students worked independently, I had watched for those using research strategies most effectively. I asked these students to share their ideas at the culmination of the period and to serve as peer models for their classmates. Chris, a student engrossed in his study of Henry Woodward, shared his method for finding information quickly. After looking in the index, he would skim the provided page for bold words. "Those are usually the ones that show you where to look," he explained.

At the culmination of the research, students began writing their own non-fiction texts. Using reference sources as models, we discussed the components of non-fiction they felt should be present in their books to make them accessible to readers in search of this previously elusive information. Students agreed that facts, pictures, captions, diagrams, and maps were needed in their books. They also realized the need to include a table of contents, an index, and a glossary in their final products. Georgia supported the need for a glossary when she stated, "You know, like if a first grader picks up the book and doesn't know what "exploration" means, they can look in the back and find

out." Each of these previously confusing concepts had come alive for students as they used them for an authentic purpose: to create a nonfiction book.

In the same whole-group approach with my guidance, we revisited the questions they set out to answer and agreed on four general themes to serve as chapters:

- What the explorers found in South Carolina
- Why their explorer came to this state
- What it took to make the journey
- What the explorer did upon arrival in South Carolina.

We discussed and agreed on criteria that would form a rubric for assessment. These guidelines included adherence to writing conventions, accurate information, inclusion of nonfiction elements, and neatness of the final product. After we reached consensus, students began using their researched information to create each chapter. The chapters were then compiled and bound for use in our classroom library. Students then determined a title for their books in hopes of catching the attention of readers in search of information on exploration. Examples of student-created book titles included:

- A Brave World
- Hernando De Soto: Spanish Explorer
- A Life at Sea
- Explorers in South Carolina
- What They Saw

My intention was to plan and implement an instructional unit that not only appealed to student interest, but also gave me the chance to guide them in the use of non-fiction as a tool for research and a style of writing. As I observed students in action, I noticed two significant developments in their growth as historians: progress in simple research skills and increased retention of content area information.

Using Skills Successfully

From my first attempt with student-led research, I found my students struggled with devising a plan for investigating their questions. At first, many students did not know how to use elements of reference sources (such as indexes, tables of contents, headings, sub-headings, and diagrams) as a means of finding information. Therefore, much of my time in the unit, "South Carolina Exploration," was spent in modeling use of these tools.

While students were engaged with their research groups, I observed their emerging understanding of how to use reference materials. Susan, a student who had expressed her boredom with history in loud groans, proudly announced that she was able to explain and support an idea to a more advanced student. John was struggling to find information on the people who accompanied Juan Pardo to the New World. I watched as Susan flipped excitedly to the index to find the explorer's name and then turned to the listed page number. As she skimmed for



the explorer's name, I waited with anticipation to see if she was able to use the skills we had focused on in that day's lesson. Her face brightened when she turned to John, pointing proudly to a sentence that answered his question.

Susan's classmates were also able to use reference sources to quickly find information. Many of my discussions with individual students focused on asking children to use a non-fiction text to find the answer to one of their questions. My prodding occurred so often that another student, Chris, would arrive at my desk with a book open to the index, his finger pointing to the page he planned to use. Students were now able to navigate these previously befuddling resources to find information that would help them as researchers.

Understanding Our History

I wanted to use inquiry in our classroom to integrate the use of nonfiction sources into the lessons and to help my students grasp historical concepts about our state. I found that students exhibited a level of understanding much higher than that attained after previous units as evidenced by discussions that I had with students, their graded written work, and their performance on a summative test. Students who had struggled with the fact-based nature of the third-grade social studies standards were now correctly answering questions and discussing topics that arose in this unit.

Betty was experiencing significant struggles academically. I would be met with a blank stare and shrugged shoulders when we discussed the regions of our state or Revolutionary War heroes from the South. After this unit, however, she raised her hand and correctly answered questions regarding which countries sent explorers to South Carolina and which explorers had succeeded in settling our state. The pride in her voice and her smile when she realized her success solidified my belief that inquiry is an effective strategy to help students of all levels go deeper into

content area material (rather than quickly covering facts in an attempt to meet state mandated requirements).

Other students who had trouble retaining information in previous units were now able to remember important facts and discuss the explorers with their classmates. I noticed students making connections to other content areas by referring to their research. For example, Mica connected his explorer to books he read for pleasure. Reading a fiction book about an armadillo whose curiosity drove him to leave his natural habitat and visit other areas of the United States, Mica made the thoughtful observation, "He's just like my explorer. He wonders what's outside his home, and he leaves to find out more."

Ongoing Learning

Through trial and error, persistence, and research on my part about teaching methods, my students and I were able to begin to integrate inquiry into our curriculum. I noticed improvements in my students' abilities as researchers and realized the importance of embracing their curiosity as a means of motivating them. Taking an active role in their own learning helped students experience the content of history in a meaningful way. Students approached non-fiction texts as more than interesting photo-albums. Instead, they started searching for new library books that would assist with our current unit of study. Books were no longer sitting in student desks or on shelves gathering dust; they were being used.

This teaching strategy activated my students' emerging ability to work as active learners and to approach their learning motivated by curiosity. The final phase of our "Exploration of the South" project was memorable. Seeing the pride on my students' faces as I handed them the "published books" that they had authored sparked my desire to provide more opportunities for them to take an active role in their learning. The excitement of the class was evident in a statement made by one of my previously disinterested students when he exclaimed, "Hey, Ms. P, maybe we can make a whole series of social studies books!" 📖

Notes

1. Paula Rogovin, *The Research Workshop: Bringing the World into Your Classroom* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001), 1.
2. Harvey Daniels and Steven Zemelman, *Subject Areas Matter: Every Teacher's Guide to Content Area Reading* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004), 230; Deidra Gammill, "Learning the Write Way," *The Reading Teacher* 59 (2006): 754-762; Paula Rogovin, 1; National Council for the Social Studies, *National Standards for Social Studies Teachers* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1997), www.socialstudies.org.
3. Linda Levstik, Keith Barton, *Doing History* (Philadelphia, PA: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000), 15; Cathy Tower, "Questions that Matter: Preparing Elementary Students for the Inquiry Process," *The Reading Teacher* 53 (2000): 550-557.
4. Harvey Daniels, Steven Zemelman, and Nancy Steineke, *Content Area Writing: Every Teacher's Guide* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2007), 26.

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