**STEP: Success in Teaching Enhanced through Partnerships (History), eNewsletter 11.2.3**

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One of the advantages of teaching middle or high school students is the opportunity to collaborate with our colleagues across the curriculum.  However, we can easily miss these teaching experiences if we are not proactively looking for them.  Taking the time to communicate and work together allows teachers to accomplish more goals collectively than they could individually. Our experiences with partnering in social studies and library research skills have inspired us to develop a STEP approach to forming and implementing cross-curricular projects.

**STEP into the Problem**

Teachers may assign a long-term project for the purpose of helping students apply their understanding, but students often approach this task with confusion or frustration because they lack clear guidelines and properly developed research skills.  This problem is further complicated when teachers are reluctant to step outside the walls of their classrooms and communicate their goals and objectives with their colleagues. Common ground and shared goals become clear when we brainstorm together. Communication creates opportunities for teachers to join forces and provides a broader understanding of both the subject area and the research process than could be obtained through individual efforts. By choosing to work together, we also model collaboration to our students. Often we ask them to team up, so it is reasonable that we should also team up. As we share our experiences, it is our desire that you will be encouraged to take the STEP yourself.

**A Baby STEP – The Roman Brochure**

Our first STEP opportunity occurred early in the school year. As we discussed project ideas for our seventh grade students, we realized we could combine our two major goals into one assignment to satisfy requirements for both classes. This combined project would allow students to learn research skills as they applied them to a core subject. Instead of working alone, we could team-teach the subject content in tandem with the practical aspects of conducting directed research in the library. We believed that combining two assignments into one would have two positive results. First, students would produce higher quality projects, and second, they would be better able to merge the skills they gained through this experience in both current and future assignments.

As a culmination to a study on ancient Rome, we assigned a long-term project for our students to complete in both social studies and research skills classes. They were asked to create a brochure on an ancient Roman topic. We developed an assignment planner based on the Big6 that clearly described each stage. We identified expected outcomes and due dates. Our sample Big6 planner and worksheets appear at the end of this article. (Note: We gave students 2 or 3 days to do their initial research before completing step 1 on the planner. They were able to write more intelligent and answerable questions after they had done some preliminary investigation of their subject.)

This brochure project was done individually to allow each student to demonstrate an understanding of the topic and to hone basic computer skills, such as planning and formatting a brochure. Students were encouraged to add their own creativity and artwork. This project was also completed entirely in class, which allowed us to guide and direct student progress. With two teachers in the room, we were better able to meet the needs of our students through individualized guidance and assistance.

**A Giant STEP – Mini History Day**

During the second semester, we knew these same students would benefit from a larger research project to prepare them for future assignments. Our school participates in National History Day in 8thgrade. Our current 8th graders were overwhelmed and under-prepared for this task. Excited at the prospect of coaching our current 7th graders in a long-term project that would set them up for success the following year, we developed a Mini History Day. This project would again combine social studies and research skills instruction and would build upon their experiences with the Roman Brochure. Our concept was simple. We scaled down all requirements of National History Day to create a smaller project that would be a reference point for the students in the following year.

We again used Big6 guidelines and developed a sequential planner to guide our students’ research on a person who lived during the Renaissance. We have included our materials at the end of this article. We also consistently scheduled two periods a week to team-teach in the library. Each session had a particular focus with definite goals for that class period. For example, the librarian would demonstrate how to use a particular research database, and then students would research for the rest of the period using just that resource, print their information and properly cite it. We repeated this process for other databases, books, and reference materials. In addition to these skills, we also taught students how to organize their research by providing pocket folders for collecting sources with a chart stapled to the front to help them complete all the requirements. Other sessions focused on the citation process of proper MLA formatting, and dividing sources into primary and secondary categories. Before the project was completed, we also enlisted the help of the English teacher to guide students to create a process paper for their projects.

In addition to the research process, we had some practical goals we wanted to accomplish with our students. We wanted students to be able to:

* Pre-plan their finished product by doing a detailed mock-up
* Practice their display skills on a small scale by using a mini tri-fold board which we found through eNASCO ([**www.enasco.com**](http://www.enasco.com/), item #9728084)
* Present their research, including the basics of mounting white text on colored backing, using a paper cutter to ensure straight edges
* Use their own creativity and not buy expensive craft items, be resourceful with coloring materials and construction paper. Pictures of some of the completed projects are included at the end of this article.
* Work in school during our work periods. Parents were relieved of the burden of helping with this assignment. All the students met the deadline with a completed project.
* Choose a partner for this project. Students learned many life lessons, such as the benefits and drawbacks of having a partner. Students also had an opportunity to learn how to manage their partnership. They learned how to evaluate their peers and some students realized that a best friend may not be the best project partner. The partnership aspect is very important due to the five-month commitment required for the 8th grade project. Some students had a great partnership while others recognized they needed to work alone or needed a different partner in the future. A self-evaluation at the end of the project helped students to clarify their thoughts.

**Finishing STEPS**

Through both of these experiences, the Roman Brochure and Mini-History Day, we witnessed how our students exceeded our expectations in the quality, creativity, and accuracy of their work. Perhaps the greatest benefit of these projects was that these students approached their 8th grade National History Day project with more confidence in planning, research, and creativity. A direct confirmation of our efforts came when these students represented our school at the state competition. A record number of student teams placed first, second, or third in each of their categories.  All first place winners went on to compete at the national level in Washington, D.C.

Success in teaching *is*enhanced through partnerships. Having clear objectives, communicating our ideas, and modeling how we as teachers work effectively together are STEPs that we can take to create a vibrant working environment for ourselves and a positive learning experience for our students.  Customizing the Big6 to research projects gives students clear guidelines and removes confusion. The benefits of the STEP method provide short and long term success for both teachers and students as we work to achieve common goals.

**About the Authors**

Cheryl Schultz received her B.S. from the University of Delaware and has also done graduate studies there. She has over 30 years’ teaching experience. For the past 8 years, she has been Upper School Librarian (grades 6-12) at Wilmington Christian School in Hockessin, Delaware.

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7th Grade Mini-History Day: Self Reflection

Your Name\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. Who were the people in your group? (if you worked by yourself, skip question #7)
2. What topic did you choose?
3. What was your best source? Why?
4. What was the hardest part about your project?
5. What would you do differently next time?
6. Think about the work you did on this project and your contribution to your group. On a scale of 1 to 10 (one being the worst and 10 being the best), rate yourself and your effort. Why did you choose that number?
7. Think about the work your group members did on the project and how they contributed. On a scale of 1 to 10 (one being the worst and 10 being the best), rate your group members. Do you have different numbers for different people? Why did you choose those numbers?

(if you worked by yourself, you should skip this question☺)

Name\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Rating\_\_\_\_Reason\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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Name\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_Rating\_\_\_\_Reason\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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1. Picture yourself in 8th grade about to start on your History Day project.

a. What advice would you give to yourself about working with a group?

b. What advice would you give on research?

c. What advice would you give on the presentation of the project?

Topic:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Name(s)\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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**Big6 Mini History Day/Renaissance Research**

**7th Grade Check Sheet**

Check off each item as you complete it and put it in the file.

\_\_\_1. **Task Definition** - **10 Questions** (lavender paper)

\_\_\_2. **Information Seeking Strategies/ 3.Location and Access** - **Required sources** – check off each item in the chart to be sure you have everything!

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Primary Sources (list them)** | √ | **Types of Sources** | √ |
| 1. |  | Book |  |
| 2. |  | Pub. Lib. Database |  |
| 3. |  | Gale Database |  |
| **Secondary Sources (list them)** |  | Other |  |
| 1. |  | Other |  |
| 2. |  | Other |  |
| 3. |  |  |  |

1. **Use of Information**

\_\_\_\_a. Sources identified and divided into Primary and Secondary Sources

\_\_\_\_b. Sources highlighted

\_\_\_\_c. 10 important dates for timeline identified on sources

1. **Synthesis**

\_\_\_\_a. *Rough Draft of Trifold*, including dates and facts for timeline, pictures and

captions, background information and accomplishments

\_\_\_\_b. *Typed Bibliography*, divided into *Primary Sources (listed first) and*

*Secondary Sources (listed second).* Put a heading at the beginning of these

sections so it is clear how they are divided. Remember to include:

* Alphabetical order (each section should be alphabetized)
* Double spacing *between* and *within* entries
* Correct MLA (Modern Language Association) style

\_\_\_\_c. **Process Paper –** 3 paragraph paper describing how you chose your individual, the sources you used and the significance of the individual in history.

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**MRS. SCHULTZ’S CLASS ONLY:**

\_\_\_6. **Big6 Assignment Planner (**lavender paper) – Complete and neat

*THAT’S ALL, FOLKS!*