

Research Projects

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Subject Area: All Subjects

Topic: Launching Investigations

Title: Research Projects

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Date: 1985

Materials/Media: an open mind and a curious question

Aim/Objectives: Focus research on questions which call for more than information-gathering

Audience/Grade Level: 3-12

Assessment: Production of novel insights

Much of the research done in school is topical in nature. Students are asked to “go find out about” a certain person, place, event or topic. The main skill involved is the gathering of information. Students who have been taught to ask questions can use them to accomplish this immediate assignment and to lay the groundwork for doing research which begins with a question. The “go find out about it” research project can begin with students asking questions. Ask them: “What questions can you ask about how to do this assignment?” They may ask such things as:

“Where do I find out about it?”

“Where do I start?”

“Which references are very general to give the big ideas?”

“Which references are too detailed for what I want to know?”

“What resources can I use besides books?”

“How will I know what is important about the topic?”

“How will I know how to organize the ideas?”

Notice that these kinds of questions lead students to develop a plan based on a clarification of their goals and what they know about available resources. The essence of this type of research assignment is finding enough information to give a general description. “A” papers hit all the high points on the topic, are well-organized and well-written. Every student can be guided by the questions which produce a quality description if we give them the questioning tools.

A more meaningful, curiosity driven version of the research project begins with student questions. Students should be able to guide research. The teacher can require types of questions which cannot be answered directly from a book. For example, if a student asks, "Which Civil War general was the best?" the gathering of information eventually leads to a student judgment based upon criteria. This evaluation task involves the student seeking information for the purpose of answering a question he or she posed, a very lifelike and lifelong activity. Instead of an assignment in a High School Health class to "go find out about a topic in human sexuality," students discuss dilemmas in human sexuality such as parenting, birth control and parent/teen conflict. Their research paper assignment is to choose a dilemma to address in detail, presenting both sides of the issue and drawing a personal conclusion. Under the careful guidance of a teacher and with support for answering questions they care about, research papers can become a source of great satisfaction to students.

Comments:

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