

Research Projects: Part II

In Australia they call it “slabbing”. In Canada and the U.S. a lot of us still call it the standard approach to a school research assignment, a.k.a. a “project”:

Step 1: Search the school and public libraries and/or surf the internet until you have amassed a mountain of information sources;

Step 2: Spend all Sunday afternoon and evening copying out anything that might be relevant;

Step 3: Channel the spirit of a Medieval Scholastic to miraculously transform the resulting random assemblage of notes and quotes into what will hopefully be a coherent thoughtful, original and, yes, even *insightful*, piece of writing.

This might sound like a tall order for kids in elementary school (especially the bit about channeling the medieval monk!) but this is where Teacher-Librarians and teachers working together with your child can make a huge difference. By breaking this process down into manageable steps and teaching the skills they need for each step of the way, this team approach to teaching can make these sorts of assignments powerful opportunities for meaningful, self-directed learning for your child. This is a cornerstone in the foundation of lifelong learning and you can help. Here’s how:

Facts and fictions: Evaluating Information

You can help guide your child’s research by showing them how to ask key questions about the information they are working with. These questions will help them sift quickly through the mountains of information and help them understand that not all information is created equal.

Start with the journalists’ approach to fact checking:

Who is the source of this information? Are they credible?

What kind of information are you getting? Is it verifiable, comprehensive, clear, coherent, well referenced, balanced or limited, biased, illogical and unsupported?

When was this source of information produced or last updated? Will it show a historical bias or lack current information?

Where is the information coming from? If the information is from a book look closely at the publisher's information on the back of the title page – where was the book published? Many books published in the United States will include statistics and other information that pertains only to the U.S. If the information is on the Internet, look at the hosting site. Information on a site that ends with “.ca” (eg <http://www.cleanairchampions.ca/>) means that the website is Canadian, “.gov” refers to the U.S. federal government, “.edu” refers to U.S. universities and colleges, “.org” tells you that the site is for a non-profit organization and of course “.com” sites are commercial.

Why use that source of information? If you are looking for recent news you will not find the most current version in a book, but it is hard to beat a book if you want carefully considered and thorough research to help you understand the news in depth.

How can you tell what is what? Healthy skepticism is your best tool so when in doubt, doubt! Double check your facts against other sources (especially if your starting point is the Internet) but be ready to trust your instincts as well.

Knowing how and when to ask these questions is an essential skill in an information economy. Where students once relied on textbook writers and editors, they are now increasingly exposed to a wide range of public opinion in the information sources they use.

Being able to tell facts (specific, accurate and provable) from opinions (thoughts, feelings, judgements, and unproven conclusions), checking for bias (exaggerations, charged words, generalizations, opinions presented as facts and prejudices), watching for inconsistencies and contradictions and distinguishing between acknowledged differences of opinion, deliberate misinformation, spin and simple errors are fundamental skills all students need, particularly when conducting research online. Teacher-Librarians collaborating with teachers are central to ensuring that kids develop these key skills.

Telling your tale: Creative ways to communicate your research findings

Once kids have gathered the information that enables them to address their critical questions and worked with their information to construct a meaningful understanding of their subject, they are going to need to decide how to organize their thoughts so they can effectively communicate their findings.

Depending on the learning outcomes the teacher targeted students might publish their findings in any one

of a number of formats from an informal oral report presented to a small group of students, to a sophisticated and polished multi-media presentation. Many teachers at different stages of a course or school year will encourage students to explore a range of communicating strategies that can provide students with opportunities to develop a variety of skills and take advantage of their unique intellectual and creative strengths. Howard Gardner (<http://www.pz.harvard.edu/PIs/HG.htm>), the Harvard psychologist whose theory of multiple intelligences suggests that the traditional emphasis on oral and written work in schools caters to a minority of students, argues that providing these options are one of many ways that teachers can support students various thinking and learning styles. In the process this enables them to develop their full potential.

Why bother with bibliographies?

Kids often don't see the point of laboriously compiling a bibliography (or as they are often now referred to a Reference List or even "Webography" (when all the information sources are Internet based). When asked whether or not they think the work they have done deserves credit they will inevitably answer that they do. Though compiling a bibliography is often perceived as an unnecessary add-on to a process that is already challenging, crediting the writers and researchers students have relied on for their work is no less important than the mark they themselves receive. This is a critical step in the ethical use of information.

There are many reasons why kids balk at this part of the research process. Because of different bibliographic styles (APA and MLA are most common at the secondary and post-secondary levels) and the seemingly arcane rules peculiar to each style compiling a bibliography can be a daunting task. Some of the resistance to compiling a proper bibliography for a research assignment often stems from the mental exhaustion experienced so often as a major assignment nears completion.

Save your kids some frustration – encourage them to put their reference list together as they do the research instead of trying to reconstruct it after all the books have been returned to the library! No matter how your daughter or son recorded her or his notes, writing down the title, author, publisher, publication date and place, and pages used when the notes are recorded can save hours of frustration later.

Fortunately a number of webservices are available to make this job easier. Check <http://www.easybib.com> and http://www.landmark-project.com/citation_machine/index.php

Reflecting: make the most of your mind!

Set the timer and encourage your child to reflect for a few moments every so often as they research. This is less common than taking a few moments to celebrate the finished product, but these precious moments of reflection have a dramatic impact on what kids learn. The more we are aware of our own thinking processes, behaviours and habits, the more influence we have over our experience of succeeding in similar situations. Encourage your son or daughter to consider these questions:

- What did I learn about the topic?
- What worked well?
- What will I do differently next time?
- What did I learn about doing research

The pay-off in their learning about their research topic and the process of doing research will be considerable.

There is much more that could be (and has been) written about helping kids with research (for more go to www.sd61.bc.ca/gvtla). Doing research is a challenging undertaking, but the rewards are great. By developing key information literacy skills and self-discipline they are building a foundation for lifelong learning

This article is Part II in a series that began last month in Island Parent (February, 2005) with “School Research Project Paralysis” available on the web at <http://www.sd61.bc.ca/gvtla>). The first article reviewed some background information about the research process, the common pitfalls of procrastination and plagiarism, key to help kids organize their thoughts and some of the services school libraries and public libraries provide.

For more information about helping your child research on the internet as well as useful tips on internet safety check out one of the upcoming workshops:

Web Awareness Workshop: Parenting the 'Net Generation

For the most part kids experiences with the Internet are positive, but there are drawbacks and safety risks too. While filters and firewalls provide some protection, kids need information and critical thinking skills to:

- protect their personal information online
- navigate chat rooms safely
- identify and handle misleading, illegal or inappropriate content, and
- deal with increasing online marketing.

An evening workshop will be offered:

March 14th at 7:30 pm in Esquimalt High School's theatre and;

March 16th at 7:30 pm in Campus View Elementary's Gym

to provide parents with some useful information about kids' use of the Internet. The presentation is based on research done across Canada by the Media-Awareness Network (www.bewebaware.ca and www.media-awareness.ca)

The workshop will highlight Internet safety hazards and offer tips for managing inappropriate content and promoting ethical online behaviour. Help your kids get the most out of the Internet by helping them learn how to find good information and how to question and evaluate online sources.

[might this make a useful sidebar?]

The Research Quest

Here are some useful questions kids can ask themselves as they work on their research assignments or pursue their own interests:

1 FOCUS

What is my research challenge?
What are the critical questions?
Who is my audience?
What do I know?
What do I need to know?
How could I show what I learned?
How will I plan my time?

2 FIND AND FILTER

Locate different types of resources.
Decide:
 which resources might be suitable?
 which are most appropriate?
Revise research questions if necessary.

3 WORK WITH THE INFORMATION

Read, view, listen.
Interpret, record, and organize.
Look for patterns, make connections.
Check for understanding.
Review, revise, reorganize, edit.

4 COMMUNICATE

Prepare final results.
Share ideas, knowledge.
Act on findings.

5 REFLECT

What did I learn about the topic?
What worked well?
What will I do differently next time?
What did I learn about doing research?