Creating Work of their Own: Skills and Voice in an Eighth-Grade Research Project

by

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DeShawn stood by my desk, worried about his research paper: “I just don’t get this thing about the bibliography. I was out when you taught the class how to do it.” Busy with other things, slightly distracted, I told him, “Don’t worry about it yet. Just do your report.” “But I can’t do it until I understand the bibliography,” he insisted. I assured him that the bibliography was really the smallest section of the report and that I’d explain it to him soon. Two days later, he stayed after class and in a firm voice told me he needed to know about the bibliography right then and there. “Listen, Mr. Roth, my paper is on Shaquille O’Neal. It’s the story of his life. So the whole thing is a bibliography. Why should it go at the end of the paper? It’s got me real confused.”

I stared at him blankly, bouncing around in my head what he had just said. Then I got it. As with perhaps thousands of 8th graders before him, DeShawn, overwhelmed by a muddle of research paper terms, had missed the distinction between “bibliography” and “biography.” Next lunch period I taught him how to do a bibliography.

Why hadn’t I responded to DeShawn sooner? From my point of view, the bibliography was peripheral, a minor part of the report. For him, it was an insurmountable barrier. Trapped in my own mistaken assumptions about what he understood and what he needed, it took me a while to even hear him.

I work in an urban school in which 95% of the students are students of color — a dazzling mix of African Americans, Latinos, Filipinos, Samoans, Chinese and Indochinese — and the majority of the teaching staff (like me) is white. Close to 70% of the students are classified as EDY (Educationally Disadvantaged Youth), and despite recent gains, their standardized test scores in reading and math fall below the state average. Although only 13 or 14 years old, many have already been labelled “at-risk,” expected to disrupt and fail. When confronted with a difficult assignment, they tend to clutch, assuming that trouble and failure is right around the corner. Too often their questions aren’t really answered; rather they are told, “If you’d paid attention earlier, you would know how to do an outline,” or “I can’t believe an 8th grader doesn’t know how to use the library.” Their frustration builds and is acted out in class. The initial negative prognosis is confirmed and the cycle continues.

It is within this context that, for three years now, I’ve assigned I-Search papers to my 8th grade U.S. history classes. The I-Search is a research paper in which
students select their own topics, develop some central questions and then chart the progress of their search for information. The final paper is supposed to include a one page summary of how they went about their research, followed by a seven to ten page report of information, two interviews, a conclusion and a bibliography. It’s a task which pushes students to use a host of research and writing skills.

Most students work hard on this assignment. They respond to the challenge and to the opportunity to pick a topic that interests them. “Can I really do a report on Samoa?” “I’m interested in Magic Johnson and H.I.V.” “What about ‘Stereotypes of Latinos’? Is that an acceptable topic?” As the students realize they can write on something that really concerns them, they click in. Still, many of these same students run into serious problems which need to be solved if they are to remain engaged. They need support and assistance, a jump start to help them get going or keep going. And each one needs something different.

What makes an initially enthusiastic student disengage from a difficult assignment? What are the real difficulties that students face and need to overcome? Looking for some answers to these questions, my colleague, Pirette McKamey, and I decided to have the students in our English-Social Studies core reflect weekly upon their work. Their reflections became mini-journals — an opportunity to voice their concerns and ask for help.

Ms. McKamey and I wanted to create a positive, caring, respectful, and academically challenging environment. We wanted students to get inside their research topics, dig for understanding, analyze the information they discovered, and find their own voices. What became clear was that we had to do more teaching and provide more structure than we had anticipated. Students wanted clear guidelines, more access to skills that could get them started, more guidance on how to turn the difficult corners.

What follows are the stories of four students' experiences with the I-Search, based on their own reflections and our observations during the course of the project. I present them as snapshots to illustrate how explicit instruction in the seemingly "mundane" skills of writing and research can help students find their own voices.

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Michael: Back To The Basics
Blessed with an easy wit and a sharp intelligence, Michael is an African American student who has nicknamed himself “Marvelous.” For Michael, the I-Search was intriguing because he could pick his own topic. And that had to be football, his all-consuming passion. Having just recovered from a broken leg sustained in a Pop Warner football game, he settled on the topic “Football Injuries.” Often reluctant to jump into a new assignment, Michael went right to work on his paper, developing questions about his topic and completing a rough draft before anyone else in the class. Adept at carrying out side conversations during class, this time he maintained his focus, making it clear to his classmates that he was too busy to engage in his usual banter. By the second week, however, he was running into difficulties:

I wrote ten questions and I wrote a 3-page essay rough draft about football injuries. My biggest problem is finding out how to put a I-Search together. Like what order to put the papers in, should I put glossary words in, or do I just put a report together with a cover? I look and look, but there are no books on my topic in the library. I also wanted to write about myself, you know, a little cover story on my injury. Can I do that?

Michael needed to do more library research to find out about football injuries other than his own. He didn’t realize that the library contained a periodical section, or that he could check out sports magazines like Sports Illustrated.

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He also needed to find a balance between writing his own story and reporting on injuries in the National Football League. His rough draft, although written from the heart, focused entirely on his own injury. Having never done a research paper before, he was confused about how to organize his report. Where should the part about his own injury go? Where should the stuff about Bo Jackson go? He wanted to
know if it was all right to copy some of Gayle Sayers’ rushing statistics from a sports encyclopedia. He had very little experience constructing an outline or clustering information.

Michael’s difficulties exposed a more widespread problem. Many students were floundering because they needed more instruction on the “basics” of the project. I fought off feelings of frustration. After all, we had done “mini-reports” earlier in the year to prepare for the I-Search. For three days before the I-Search, we had modeled interviews and developed an outline for an imaginary I-Search report about our school. I had used the overhead projector to demonstrate the difference between copying from an encyclopedia and putting information into your own words. Students had the opportunity to look over a sampling of last year’s I-Search reports. But none of this was enough. This project was a stretch — a challenge — and many students were simply overwhelmed. They couldn’t recall what we had discussed about outlining, they were confused about what questions to ask in an interview, they didn’t know how to begin. The earlier lessons had been done before the project started; now they had to be reinforced within the context of the I-Search.

Taking a deep breath, I decided to spend three additional days teaching and discussing some “dos and don’ts” of how to organize a research paper. We went over again how to do an outline or cluster — this time moving immediately from the lesson into developing outlines for their own reports. Seven students volunteered to read the first two paragraphs of their reports, demystifying the issue of “how do we start.” Students shared note-taking techniques and helped each other think up interview questions. The relief in the class was evident.

Michael eventually decided to compare his injury and its aftermath to the experiences of star players in the National Football League. He also developed a set of questions to ask his parents about their reactions to his injury. Looking through back issues of Sports Illustrated, Michael found two or three articles about football injuries. He created a cluster about different types of football injuries and found information about each of them. Not knowing how to type and with no computer available at home, he spent day after day in the library, carefully writing out his report by hand. A month into the project, he could report substantial progress.

I done reports on knee injuries, head injuries etc. I wrote about Gale Sayers’ injuries and my own injury and those of a lot of other people. I also have interviewed my mom and dad and asked them what were they feeling when I got hurt and I asked them how they felt about me coming back and playing again with a screw in my knee, but you will just have to wait to see how good it is, and I’m really doing well with this report.

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Michael still had a lot of work to do. With no subheads or paragraphs, plenty of run-on sentences and numerous spelling errors, he faced a massive job of editing. By this time, though, he was so invested in the paper that he shrugged off the extra work. After we worked together editing a few pages, he jumped into this tedious job with the same enthusiasm he had for the earlier work. Michael had accomplished a great deal — and he knew it.

One thing I learned in doing this I-Search is that you have to put a lot into it, because what you put into it is what you will get out of it. Doing this project I had to go to different people and different places for information and knowing how to put the whole thing together was the hardest part of all, but I knew I had a job to do and I wasn’t going to stop until it was done.

Annie: The Library Problem

Annie had puzzled me from the beginning of the year. Diligent and responsible, she turned in most homework assignments and made sure to complete all her classwork. But at the same time, she let me know — by the notes she passed to friends in class, by her vacant stare when I asked a question, by the carelessness of much of her work — that she wasn’t all there, that she wasn’t all that interested.

Annie knew from the beginning that she wanted to write a report about her home country of Samoa. She stayed after class to copy down all the due dates for various segments of the project. "I'm gonna get an A on this one, Mr. Roth." But she did very little work for
the first two weeks. Her first written reflection sent out the warning signals:

I really need help on how to start. My topic is on Samoa and I am doing really bad because I don't know how to start. The reason is because the books I have are only travel books. Those were the only books they had at the library about Samoa. It's hard because I don't understand these travel books. I am going to bring them into class tomorrow and let you see them. I took some notes from the encyclopedia and it's not much. So really, it's the researching that's hard.

Of course the research was hard for her. The school library had nothing on Samoa. The nearest public library had a few glitzy travel books about the “island paradise.” The encyclopedia had a short entry on Samoa, written in 1965. When she asked the librarian to copy something for her, the material came back with the wrong pages copied. Annie could have just written down a few things from each of the books and cobbled together a mediocre report. But this was not the exciting project she had in mind. Something was wrong, something she did not know how to fix. Annie voiced her concerns:

I haven't done nothing yet but Ms. McKamey and I started on my questions. I haven't done anything because the books I have are very difficult to get some information.

By this time she and Ms. McKamey had connected, and had worked up a set of questions about her topic. What did she really want to know? What interested her? What was the focus of her report? Even though this represented progress, it wasn't enough to get Annie going. Those books had her paralyzed. Every time she looked at them, she lost direction. She needed an alternative or the report was going nowhere. Where could she get information that reflected the reality of her culture? Ms. McKamey urged Annie to focus more on interviews with family members and spend less time worrying about getting the information from the outdated books she had found.

Together they agreed on a list of interview questions, including: “What kind of transportation is used in Samoa?” “How hard is it to find a job there?” and “What are some things about life in Samoa that are different from here in the U.S.?” Ms. McKamey also helped Annie get the first words of her report down on paper. Once she was liberated from the travel books, Annie realized that her family stories were invaluable resources. Talking to her uncle, she learned all about the matai system in which chiefs rule over village life. She learned about the downturn in the tuna industry and rising unemployment in American Samoa. She gathered information about the strict discipline in Samoan schools. The project took off.

On the day the report was due, Annie got to class before anyone else, her completed paper in hand. It turned out to be remarkable — filled with factual information about Samoa as well as vivid accounts of her own family’s experiences, topped off with carefully drawn maps and a beautiful cover, the result of hours of work in the computer lab. Annie’s introduction focused on why this report had been important for her:

I think learning and writing about your own culture is a good thing for someone my age to do. I thought it would be a good thing to do a report on Samoa because I don't know a lot about it. I am proud that I am doing my I-Search on my own culture.

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Anthony: I Hate Projects
A few students never got into the I-Search. For them, it was just another assignment, one with a lot of work attached. Overwhelmed and frustrated, they were seemingly immune to assistance, whether during class time or in one-on-one conferences.

Anthony is an African American student who lives in one of the most dangerous, high-crime sections of the city. He has spent a good deal of his young life defending himself, avoiding drug dealers and watch-
ing his back. Once when I drove him back to his house after school, he realized that he’d forgotten his keys and was too nervous to wait on his doorstep for his mom to come home from work. He had been jumped by some older boys the day before, and he was afraid they might still be looking for him.

Despite being one of the shortest boys in the whole school, Anthony commanded total respect through his personality, intelligence and humor. While he did well in the 7th grade, he seemed preoccupied as an 8th grader, unable to focus on his schoolwork. Although he had spurts in which he handed in homework and participated well in class, he was also frequently absent or late and his work suffered.

Anthony did not like the I-Search. He picked a familiar topic, the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, and seemed bored from the beginning. His first reflection was filled with complaints:

I have two books but I have done nothing but I am reading the books. My problems are how can I do this. I have problems on how to do projects but I want to do it on the computer but the computer lab is never open. I heard part of “I Have a Dream” speech, but that’s about all I’ve done.

Perhaps Anthony needed to address the difficult circumstances of his own life, focusing his I-search on the issues in his neighborhood, combining interviews and his own perspective.

Since Anthony was one of my teacher’s aides, we spent a good deal of time together. Disturbed by the early warning signs of trouble, I had a series of talks with him in which we worked out an initial outline. I provided him with three young adult books on Dr. King. We worked out a schedule for time in the computer lab. But things didn’t really improve:

I have read some of my books. I have wrote down some of the things I learned about him. I hate doing reports but my grade depends on this project so I am going to do some of the things that I need to do and more.

Anthony made it clear that he was doing the I-Search under extreme duress, motivated solely by concern over his grade. When one issue was addressed—like doing an outline—another issue immediately popped up. While he worked intermittently in class, his mother reported that he did absolutely no work at home. After the Easter vacation, he could only report that things had deteriorated further:

Over the vacation I didn’t do anything because I want new books. My problem is that I really have no idea what to do. I don’t think I can put it in a project form but if I try maybe I can.

What was wrong with the books he already had? Anthony said that they “didn’t have enough information.” When I showed him three or four sections from one of the books with precisely the information he needed, he told me that he had taken notes from those sections already but his mother had lost his notes. When I offered him help on redoing the notes, he insisted he could do the report himself. When I asked him what he meant by “I don’t think I can put it in a project form,” he said he didn’t know in what order to put the various sections. When I explained the order to him, he complained that the whole thing was just too much work. Anthony was a resister:

I didn’t learn anything. I know MLK did marches and speeches, that’s the only thing my books talk about. I hated the project. It took away most of my time, nothing helped me solve my problems. I just wrote things down on a piece of paper. My weakness is doing reports. I can’t put words out on paper except when I like to do projects. Other than that I hate projects.

Looking back, I can see where we may have gone wrong. The Martin Luther King report was a bad idea from the beginning—been there, done that. Perhaps Anthony needed to address the difficult circumstances of his own life, focusing his I-search on the issues in his neighborhood, combining interviews and his own perspective. Maybe that would have clicked. But I was not agile enough to send him in that direction. In the end, the best I could do was hang in with him, refusing to let the I-Search define his whole year. There would be other projects, other chances.
Carolina: Finding Her own Words
Carolina loved to write first drafts. She would hand in long, flowing passages filled with emotion and personality, sometimes on topic, sometimes off. It was the revising she hated. For her, writing seemed to be an immediate form of expression, not the kind of thing you looked at again, worked over, restructured.

Carolina jumped at the chance to do the report. This was an opportunity to uncover more about her Mexican roots. Proud and conscious of her identity, she wanted to dig deeper. “I know I want to do something about Mexico, but I’m not sure what I’m going to really think about it.” Two days later, she announced that her report would be on the rebellion in Chiapas.

Each day she had another question about Chiapas: When did the rebellion start? Why was the government so mean to the indigenous people? Who was Commander Marcos? She was deep into her search, determined to understand every aspect of the situation. That’s why her next reflection took me a bit by surprise.

It has been fun working with my topic, especially looking for information. I have done my interviews and it’s really fun. But I think I’m getting left behind. I really will like if you can help me. I went down to the library and they didn’t have nothing about Chiapas. So if you have any kind of information, like maps, graphics, books or newspaper I will be glad to look at it. There’s not that much information about Chiapas. Is it o.k. if I change my topic to just Mexico?

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It wasn’t O.K. Like Annie, Carolina was faced with the “library problem” — no books about her topic — and she was thinking of heading for the safer ground of a generic report on Mexico. We sat down and talked about bookstores in the Mission District where she could find information on Chiapas. We talked about news magazines and how to use them. I agreed to give her some of my own material on Chiapas. Carolina decided to continue her search — and her report began to take shape.

I bought a book and also had some of Mr. Roth’s books. With Mr. Roth’s books, I took notes but I seem not really to understand. I asked my parents if they had some information. They bought me a book in Spanish, but it was written by Zapatistas. I read the book and took notes. Now I finished the book. I just need to start writing my report.

Carolina now had to decipher a series of densely-written political tracts and newspaper commentaries. On the day we did our “anti-copying” lesson, focused on note-taking techniques, she stayed after class to ask for assistance: Could I help her take notes from one of her books? Could I review her third attempt at an outline? She wanted this report to “have everything correct.” We worked together for an hour as she took notes on the Zapatista program, putting it into her own words. She realized that she could pull out the main points, even if she didn’t understand every single word. Her confidence growing, she went home to take notes about the North American Free Trade Agreement.

The next day I watched in amazement as she moved to a corner of the library and sat quietly for two straight periods, painstakingly putting information into her own words. While other students rushed to get words on paper, she read every page of her books
and magazines, laboring over the more difficult sections. For Carolina the I-Search wasn’t just another classroom assignment. It was a way to understand her own story, and she was determined to “get it” and then communicate it as clearly as possible. At one point, I stopped by her table in the library just in time to hear her explain in detail to two other Latino students why the campesinos in Chiapas had rebelled.

In the end, Carolina understood a great deal. Her report detailed the history and background of the rebellion and grappled with the complexities of economic crisis and political turmoil in Mexico. She included insightful interviews with family members who had once lived in Chiapas, providing their perspective on the hardships of life in the area and oppression faced by indigenous people in the region. And she wrote with a passion about why people in Chiapas risked their lives to stand up against the Mexican government:

If you look back in history you can see that everything that happened in the past is happening now. Zapata, Pancho Villa and Marcos have placed their names in a history book of people that fought against their government. I understand why many people get in rebellion against Mexico, but especially the main things that they need and ask for. The government doesn’t help them, but instead answers back with an army full of weapons and attacks people on Christmas Eve, brutally killing people. Those are the things that make me mad.

Out of a class of 31 students, 29 turned in their reports. Some were a few days late or put together at the last minute: Marissa copied her report on Laos from the encyclopedia, Jennifer handed in a hastily-done, superficial report on Vietnam, and Brenda’s report on Queen Nefertiti never really got going. And, of course, there was Anthony. But there was also Luis, writing passionately about his family’s experiences during the Salvadoran civil war; Crystal discovering the poetry of Maya Angelou; Demario wading his way through the complexities of World War II; Marlon speculating on why more African-Americans don’t play soccer; Rachel recounting her uncle’s stories of growing up in Leyte.