# Using Writing Projects in a High School Classroom to Support Students' Literacy Development and Foster Student Engagement

*Salika A. Lawrence and Maureen Harrison*

**ABSTRACT**

This article describes the process used by one high school teacher to incorporate writing into her classroom.  The teacher made several modifications to her curriculum to provide her students with opportunities to engage in online research, and produce text for real-world audiences.  The students' comments indicate that although they were initially apprehensive they were ultimately excited to work on the project. The writing project provided an opportunity for students to use English language arts skills and interact with various nonfiction texts.
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Students in the U.S. are constantly bombarded with a plethora of information and texts from different sources. Some educators have called for more student interaction with nonfiction texts such as biographies and maps, starting as early as elementary school (Schachter, 2006). These educators also believe that teachers should incorporate more informational texts into the curriculum (Schachter, 2006).

The National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association (1996) English Language Arts Standards, which are aligned to state assessments, suggest that reading and writing require distinct processes of learning. Secondary-school students are expected to read books from a variety of genres, to produce a report of information, to write persuasively, to work with peers and teachers, to study literature, and to interpret texts. Throughout the reading process, students are expected to provide examples from their interpretation of text, to make connections between texts and their personal experiences, to apply what they have learned from text, and to examine text critically (National Council of Teachers of English & International Reading Association, 1996). The effectiveness of informational and nonfiction texts is currently a hot topic (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2008) in the area of literacy.

With regard to writing, secondary-school students are expected to engage in a writing process through which they receive feedback from peers to revise their work, to write for various audiences, and to develop style, tone, and stance (National Council of Teachers of English & International Reading Association, 1996). Although these literacy practices, which focus on the process of literacy development, are not feasible during a timed, standardized test, several factors influence the feasibility of these practices in secondary classrooms, the most significant of which is the classroom environment itself: that it is conducive for literacy instruction.

## Research on Secondary Literacy Instruction

Secondary literacy instruction is complex. When students produce text in academic contexts, they can be influenced by teacher expectations for writing.  These expectations may be narrow characterizations of what it means to be a proficient writer. Even more problematic is that much of the writing instruction in secondary schools is shaped by standardized testing, and many of the instructional choices made by today's teachers frequently contradict those teachers' beliefs about literacy (Lawrence, 2007). Although studies reveal that teachers continue to struggle for ways to integrate literacy instruction into their curriculum within the current context of high stakes testing (Kern, Andre, Schilke, Barton, & McGuire, 2003; Klecker & Pollock, 2005; Lester, 2000; White, Strutevant, & Dunlap, 2003), research on teachers' instructional choices (Taylor, Peterson, Pearson, & Rodriguez, 2002), as well as teacher and student reports on the workshop model, suggests that when teachers integrate multiple approaches for literacy instruction into their repertoire, students benefit (Allen, 1995; Mueller, 2001).

Graham and Perin (2007) stated: "modern writing instruction in the United States recognizes that students need to write clearly and for a wide variety of real-life purposes" (p. 22). In-school writing experiences are often not flexible enough to support students' literacy development in this area. Research shows that teachers must use a process writing approach to improve students' writing skills, which requires that teachers interweave "a number of writing instruction activities in a workshop environment that stresses extended writing opportunities" (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 4).

When Ball (1995, 1996) examined the expository writing samples of four academically successful African-American high school students, she claimed that students' culture and literacy experiences outside of school, especially within their local discourse communities, have a significant impact on the student's academic success. According to Ball, student writing was directly linked to cultural influences.  Ball's (1995, 1996) research documents that African-American students tend to use the following elements in writing: rhythmic language, anecdotes, parables, and patterns of repetition and call and response—linguistic features that help the students produce successful literary pieces (such as rap lyrics) in the local community. Instead of educators noting the cultural influences evident in the texts African-American students produced in school as strengths, Ball (1995, 1996) learned that teachers labeled the writing by African-American students as limited in proficiency or below the standard in school contexts. Ball's inquiries suggest that the students in her study were successful in school largely because they were able to codeswitch. The students who successfully completed

writing assignments indicated that assignments were completed to fit the teacher's expectations, which included writing for a particular audience and changing grammar to fit the persona created for the narrative. Students who lacked the know-how to make the linguistic adjustments when transferring from nonacademic to academic contexts, however, failed to meet expectations.

Cummins (2000) asserts that the acquisition of an academic language is a developmental process. For academic language learners, "language and content will be acquired most successfully when students are challenged cognitively but provided with the contextual and linguistic supports or scaffolds required for successful task completion" (p. 71). These kinds of academic expectations, namely writing essays and reading lengthy expository texts, can reduce student motivation and engagement with academic tasks. Researchers have documented that adolescents are more engaged in school when they have choices, learning experiences that are connected to other aspects of their lives, and exposure to a wide variety of texts (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik 1999; Mueller, 2001; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). For example, "allowing student choice in writing tasks and genres can improve motivation. At the same time, writing choice must be balanced with a recognition that adolescents also need to learn the literacy practices that will support academic success" (National Council of Teachers of English, 2007, p. 4). Teachers have reported that students are engaged and motivated to complete assignments when they are provided with texts connected to their lives, given clear expectations before beginning assignments, provided examples, and given in-class time to work on assignments (Lawrence, 2007). A report by the National Council of Teachers of English (2007) states: "the number of students who are not engaged with or motivated by school learning grows at every grade level, reaching epidemic proportions in high school" (p. 4). One solution may be to find ways to bridge the gaps between students' outside-of-school literacy practices and their in-school expectations (Hinchman, Alvermann, Boyd, Brozo, & Vacca, 2003/2004).

Alvermann (2004) reported that "alliterate" adolescents choose not to participate or interact with texts encountered in school because the texts do not connect to their lives and the students do not see the purpose of their in-school activities. Researchers have identified *interest* and *engagement* as the key factors when considering the impact of school literacy assessments on students' long-term academic success (Collins, 1996; Guthrie & Solomon, 1997; Irwin, 2003; Wigfield, Guthrie, Tonks, & Perencevich, 2004).

Despite the literature referenced above, little research has been done to document the instructional practices most frequently used in high school classrooms. Specifically, there is scarce research in the practices of English language arts and reading, where students are expected to interact with a wide variety of texts to support their literacy development. In this article, we describe the impact on students' writing, of two areas in secondary instruction often overlooked: literacy and student engagement. All names in the article are pseudonyms.

### Description of the Context and Writing Project

The research project was implemented at Premier High School, a large urban high school in northern New Jersey with almost 3,000 students. Sixty-one percent of the

students are eligible for free and reduced lunch. Students attending the Premier High School identify themselves as White (2%), Black or African American (12%), Asian (6%), and Hispanic (81%) (www.publicschoolreview.com/school_ov/school_id/52705).

Rebecca teaches level 1 reading classes at the high school. Students are placed in Rebecca's class because they failed the Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA), which is taken in grade 8, and the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA), taken in grade 11. These exams are the standardized English tests in New Jersey.

The research project unit was implemented in all of Rebecca's classes in May 2008, at which time she taught level 1 reading to freshmen, sophomores, and juniors. The students ranged in ability but shared some similar characteristics. Most of the students did not have any significant difficulties with reading and writing, but they were unmotivated.

On the extreme ends of the group, Rebecca noted Raymond, a freshman who struggled in numerous classes this year. He had difficulty paying attention and staying on task. In addition, Raymond often missed assignments. Raymond passed his classes during the 2007–2008 school year with a low D and did not pass his English class. Although personable, Raymond did not appear to see the need to work hard to address the issues he faced with reading and writing skills. On the opposite end of the spectrum was another freshman, Tamara, who was confident and very outspoken, highly motivated, and will take higher-level English courses in the fall.  The skill and motivation of the other students fell somewhere between Raymond and Tamara; some of the other students were highly motivated and completed all assignments. Other students, such as those previously in the ESL program, were motivated but struggled with oral communication in English and rarely indicated that they were having difficulty with assignments. Some students in Rebecca's classes could be characterized as apathetic and disinterested.

Working in collaboration with a university professor, Johanna, Rebecca implemented a research unit with the high school students. The unit, which was developed by Johanna, focused on providing students with an authentic writing experience that fosters interaction with nonfiction texts and further develops an understanding of the research process. During implementation of the research unit, Johanna visited Rebecca's classes to observe lessons, to teach demonstration lessons, to co-plan, and to assist Rebecca by facilitating activities in the computer lab. Rebecca and Johanna also did a lot of the co-planning electronically via email.

For this project, Rebecca instructed 32 high school students to write a fictitious interview with a person of their choice in the style of a newspaper article. She asked the students to select any person from a specific list. Rebecca provided interview questions and the students also generated additional questions for the interview on their own. To obtain answers to these questions, the students conducted Internet research to learn as much as possible about the interviewee. The students summarized and paraphrased the information they obtained from the research into an interview format where the interviewee answered the questions posed by the student. The students were required to type the final draft of the project using Microsoft Publisher.

Rebecca modified the curriculum used in previous years to teach research and note-taking, which had included instruction in isolating specific information. For this research project, Rebecca instructed the students to highlight facts and unfamiliar words. She also

instructed the students in strategies for deciphering the meaning of a word based on its use in a sentence. Additionally, students were introduced to the following research process:

1. Use a Know, Want to Know, Learned (KWL) chart to develop questions before looking for information. Rebecca provided the class with five questions and the students had to create four questions of their own.
2. Look for information on the Internet by locating a variety of sources.
3. Take notes from the sources to answer the questions on the KWL chart. The students were encouraged and reminded to synthesize or paraphrase the information from the sources to answer the question.

Table 1a provides an overview of the steps used during roughly the first week and one half of the interview research project.

Table 1a. Implementation of Week One of the Interview Research Project

| Day | Activities |
|---|---|
| 1 | 1. Introduce project—give students an overview of the project and of the objective. Provide students with packet that includes project description, timeline for project completion, checklist, KWL chart, rubric, and list of *Time's 100*.<br>2. Give students time to review list of *Time's 100* (approx. 10–15 minutes).<br>3. During silent review, students choose a number from a cup. The number designates the order in which students will choose their interview subject. Instruct students to be ready with three choices as each name may be chosen only once. Inform students that they may be allowed to select an interviewee that is not on the list but the name will be subject to approval.<br>4. Students choose interview subjects and document choices. |
| 2 | 1. Students begin KWL chart on their chosen subject. Complete a sample chart together on the board with a student-recommended person from the list.<br>2. Students fill in KWL charts on interviewee.<br>3. Assist students with finding information. Additionally, students may help each other find information. Inform students that no information is trivial and all information should be noted on chart.<br>4. Instruct students to strive to note at least three pieces of information. Some students will have full charts while others will have less information. |
| 3 | 1. Provide students with five interview questions and instruct them to make up four questions of their own.<br>2. Students brainstorm additional questions and share their ideas.<br>Required questions:<br>What was the most difficult obstacle you had to overcome?<br>What accomplishments are you most proud of?<br>What would you most like to be remembered for?<br>What was the best decision you ever made?<br>What is the most important issue facing our society? (What is our biggest problem?) |
| 4–8 | 1. Students begin research in computer lab and print material about their interviewee.<br>2. If students locate all potential material before computer lab time is complete, they can use the time to read the material and highlight potential answers. |

Most of the second and third weeks of the project (days 9 through 19) were spent in the classroom. During these two weeks if students reported difficulty finding the answers to specific questions, Rebecca reviewed the specific issue and advised the students. For example, with the question, *"What is the most important issue facing society?"* the students had to create an answer that reflected the personality of the interviewee. Essentially they had to deduce or infer the answer based on the details they learned about the person, and then consider what issue that person would find important. In certain instances questions were amended as necessary. Table 1b provides an overview of how the last four weeks spent on the project were scheduled.

Table 1b. Implementation of the Interview Research Project

| Day | Activities |
|---|---|
| 9–19 | 1. Students review material.<br>2. Highlight answers to questions.<br>3. Note answers on KWL chart (column three).<br>4. Handwrite first draft of the interview.<br>5. Proofread first draft.<br>6. Teacher review of first draft.<br>7. Students write second draft.<br>Teacher review of second draft. |
| 20–25 | 1. Guide students through using Microsoft Publisher in the computer lab. Use the newsletter template to create the desired layout. Instruction time to introduce students to the software should take approx. one class period.<br>2. Use flash drives to save work.<br>3. In the lab students type the project into the selected Microsoft Publisher template.<br>4. Students select graphics to insert in program.<br>5. After students have created the newspaper, they must proofread their material. Students review the project checklist and submit finished project. |

### Student English Language Arts Proficiencies

This writing project developed students' English language arts skills. Students wrote fictional narratives from the first person point of view and demonstrated through their writing that they could proficiently address their audience, adjust tone, and manipulate font and text in the final project. For example, students adopted the persona— voice and tone—of the interviewee. In some cases, students whom Rebecca previously observed reading contemporary teen fiction regularly adapted the language of the interview to the style of adolescent literature.

Students summarized and paraphrased information in their own words. Rebecca observed that she did not have to "push" students to put the information in their own words. She also recalled that students incorporated writing conventions: they asked questions about writing, punctuation, and grammar. In some cases students made dialect shifts during the interview. For example, during the interview with Jay-Z, Frank asked "Who are you "Beefin" with right now?" (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Frank's article on Jay-Z.

Some students found it easier to look for information because they had developed the focus questions in advance. One participant would recommend that other students "make your own questions first." Other students realized that it was okay to change their questions. One student said she changed her questions because she realized that "once you find the right research then you would find the answer for the question." In a similar comment, another student said "...don't try killing yourself on answering one question. Just do the next question." Some students found it difficult to answer the questions. One student said it was a challenge "answering the questions that wasn't in my notes," "finding out the right information," or "making my own answer because I didn't find enough information."

At the conclusion of the project, when students evaluated their work they noted strengths and weaknesses with English language arts skills and how they would improve in those areas on a similar assignment. For example, two students reported that they would "put more information" or put "more details in [the] answers" because the article was not fully developed. Another student recommended that someone working on this project should "write in complete sentences" and "organize [their] work." The students suggested fitting "everything in one page" and "write the article first then do the pictures." One student said he would format the article differently and that he wished he knew "how to end the interview… [because he] wanted a good closing sentence." These comments suggest that students evaluated their finished product by critiquing the grammar, style, format for the genre, organization, planning, and writing process they used, specifically the editing and organizational strategies. Rebecca recalls students asking questions regarding the appropriate way to use quotation marks, to write dialogue, and to identify movie titles.

### Student Perceptions of the Project

Although some students wished they knew more about the software so they could work more on the project or so they could use the software sooner in the process—and a few students wished they had more time to work on the project—overall the students said they enjoyed working on the project. Students said they liked learning about the person, "researching all the answers," and "making up the questions." These students also indicated that they liked the flexibility of developing and answering their own questions, and of selecting their research subject. One student reported "the best part of the project was when [he] was surfing the web for information and pictures." Some students lamented that they were not assigned a project like this in previous classes throughout the years. At the end of the project, all of the students were excited to receive color copies of their final publication.

Many students indicated they did not enjoy various aspects of the research process. Several students, 46%, said it was difficult to develop their own research questions and 38% said it was difficult identifying sources and searching for information that would help them answer their research questions, to summarize or to put information into their own words, and to determine what information to quote from different sources. A few of the students (8%) held negative views of developing questions, of identifying sources and searching for information, and of finding answers to their questions. A closer

look at the research areas that caused the most difficulty shows that students had difficulty generating questions, answering the questions, locating information to answer their questions, and putting the information they found in their own words (Table 2).

Table 2. Students' Perceived Difficulties with the Research Process

| Component of Research Process | Number of Students who Expressed Difficulty in Each Area (N=34) | Students' Comments Indicating Difficulties in Each Area |
|---|---|---|
| Developing questions (includes changing or refining questions) | 10 | • com[ing] up [with] four of our own questions and answer[ing] them too |
| Summarizing, synthesizing, or paraphrasing information | 4 | • [answering] questions that wasn't [sic] in my notes |
| Identifying sources or finding information to answer questions posed | 23 | • finding out the right information<br>• making my own answer because I didn't find enough information<br>• research[ing] his exact words |

A few students, 38% ,commented about making up answers because they couldn't find information. For example one student said it was difficult "making up some of the things Coco Chanel did because not [sic] information is out about her." An examination of students' folders and collected information suggests that students could not synthesize information to answer their questions. If the answer were not explicitly available in a source, it appears the students felt they could not answer that question, or had to change the question. It seems students had difficulty inferring or synthesizing information to "create" a hypothetical answer the person would give in response to the question they asked.

**A Modified Writing Process**

Students used a modified writing process to write their news article. Many of the students used the KWL chart as a graphic organizer for preplanning and generating research questions (see Figure 2).

**KWL+S Chart**

Name: S_____ P.    Topic/ Name of Person I am Researching: Coco Chanel

| K<br>What I Already Know | W<br>What I Want to Know<br><br>(What questions do I have about this topic?) | L<br>What I Learned<br><br>(What did I find out through research?) | S<br>What sources I used<br><br>(Where did I find answers to my question(s)?) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Creater of channel co.<br><br>deisigner<br><br>Might be old or dead.<br><br>very famous. | ~~[scribbled out]~~ | her mom died when she was six. | google.com |
|  | What Race is she? | What inspired coco to do fashion was living in a house of nuns. | ask.com. |
|  | does she have any kids? | was abandoned by her father. | wikipedia.com |
|  | who inspired you to do what you do today? | had souer other sibling. | |
|  | Have you made any mistakes or bad decisions. | she died on Jan. 10, 1971 | [Primary] |
|  |  | she was 88 years old at the time of her death. | |

Figure 2. Simone's KWL chart.

After the students identified and selected online information sources, they had to summarize and paraphrase information they obtained. When taking notes, students had to identify the source of the information on the KWL chart, as indicated in Figure 2. The students were also required to use highlighters to identify information they could use to answer the questions generated on the KWL chart.

After extrapolating information from the different sources, students summarized or paraphrased the information and wrote it in the third column of the KWL chart (Figure 2). Then students used their notes to write a handwritten draft of their article.

The students typed the final draft of the article in the format of a news article using publishing software. Some students indicated that they did not like that they were required to write a draft of their article by hand before going back to the computer lab. One student said: "one of the parts [of the project] I least liked was writing the rough draft."
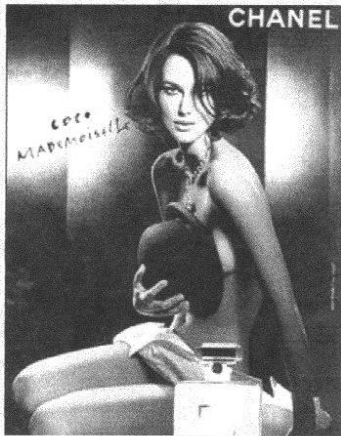
When the students were in the computer lab, they selected the templates to lay out their article. As illustrated in Figures 3 and 4, both Simone and Althea researched Coco Chanel but Althea chose a different template from Simone.

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# S            's Newspaper

By: S        R

### About "Coco" Chanel

Gabrielle Bonheur "Coco" Chanel was born on August 19, 1883 In a small city called Samur, France. She was only six years old when she lost her mother and shortly after, her father abandoned her and her four siblings to the care of relatives as their guardian. Then they were sent to spend time in a French orphanage. That's where Chanel was inspired- The stark dress of the nuns in the environment greatly influenced her later classic designs.

## INTERVIEW WITH COCO CHANEL

1-Q: What was the most difficult obstacle you had to overcome?

A: The most difficult obstacle I had to overcome would probably be losing my mother at such a young age.

2-Q: What accomplishments are you most proud of?

A: The accomplishments that I'm most proud of are creating my company and being successful with it.

3-Q: What would you most liked to be remembered for?

A: I would like to be remembered for my great and classy designs.

4-Q: What was the best decision you ever made?

A: The best decision I ever made was looking forward to life and my successful career.

5-Q: What is the most important issue facing our society?

A: I think poverty is the most important issue facing our society.

6-Q: Who inspired you to do what you do today?

A: My guardians at the orphanage really inspired me with their looks.

7-Q: Have you made any mistakes or bad decisions in the past that you regret?

A: Yes, I have

8-Q: Explain.

A: Well everyone makes mistakes and all of mine I've just lost count.

9: Were you looking forward to come here?

A: yea I've always wanted to come here.

Figure 3 Final draft of article on Coco Chanel by Simone.

# Flashback

By: A        D

## Lead Story Headline

Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel is remembered for introducing black as a fashion color. Most of her fashion material was known for being strong most of it was sewn, or quilted which is what kept the material strong. Coco and Diane Boulting-Casserley Vandelli, got together with Coco and made Chanel more popular and known in Europe.

Gabrielle Chanel was born 1883 in Saumur, but she lied and claimed she was born 1893 in Auvergne. From the day she was born she was a poor young girl, her mother worked in a poorhouse which was where Gabrielle was born. Six years later Gabrielle's mother passed away leaving six of her children to their father. He abandoned all of the children, leaving them with relatives. Things didn't work out with Gabrielle living with her relatives, so she became an orphan. Gabrielle did not attend College, during those times because it was unusual for an orphan to attend college. Once Gabrielle was old enough to live by herself and not an orphan anymore she started having affairs with wealthy men to boost up her career in fashion. Soon after her affairs with the wealthy men she started working in shops, and that's when the "Little Black

Dress", and now I am going to start with the interview with Gabrielle Coco Chanel.

Q:How did you get the idea of the clothing line Chanel?

A:I started dating wealthy men and they started putting me in shops to work and that's when I got the idea of being a fashion designers, so I thought long and hard about it, and that's when I made up my mind, and of course I got the name from my last name.

Q:What materials are used for the products?

A:Many different materials are used for Chanel, we use quilted pattern, quilted fabric, "secret" which is sewn in the back, and which keep the material is strong.

Q:Why is your product so expensive?

A:I don't necessarily want my products to be expensive because I would love for everyone to wear it, but it may e expensive because the material is real, as well the material we have to buy and it is expensive on air behalf so we have to make the profit, we also use leather, and real leather is quite expensive.

Q:What accomplishments are you most proud of?

A:The most things I'm proud of for Chanel is most of the items we have made, from handbags, jewelry and shoes, we also make haute couture, casual clothing, pea jackets and bell bottom jeans.

Q:What would you most likely to be remembered for?

A:I would love to be remembered for being one of the big fashion designers during this time, also I would love to be remembered for turning women clothing more casual, and making black a fashion color.

Q:What would you most likely to be remembered for?

A:I would love to be remembered for being one of the big fashion designers during this time, also I would love to be remembered for turning women clothing more casual, and making black a fashion color.

*Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel, when she first got started in the business of fashion.*

Figure 4: Final layout of article on Coco Chanel by Althea.

Students demonstrated increased knowledge of technology and software but maintained a disconnection between using technology as part of the writing process. For example, one student said, "I liked the typing part of the project." It appears that the students did not consider typing the article part of the writing process. It is also possible that the students held negative perceptions of writing by hand but preferred to write or type on the computer and did not see the purpose of writing by hand before going to the computer.

## A Range of Instructional Strategies

The teacher used various strategies to support students' literacy development, including modeling, in-class instruction time, and hands-on practice. Writing instruction emphasized note-taking, summarizing, identifying different sources of information, and using software. The teacher placed little emphasis on citing and quoting sources.

At the beginning of the project the teacher modeled how to complete the KWL chart and generate questions before looking for information. She used her knowledge of Kanye West, a rapper familiar to the students, to show students this initial step in the research process.

The teacher also introduced students to a variety of note-taking and summarization strategies. One frequent lesson taught during the project was summarization. During this lesson the teacher showed students how to take an article and summarize it in five lines.

The teacher instructed students on how to read and highlight important information. During these lessons the teacher asked students to underline or highlight fact and opinion, and highlight words they did not know in the newspaper articles. The teacher would then show the students how to determine the meanings of these words while reading. The teacher also created open-ended comprehension questions for the students to answer.

Johanna and Rebecca co-taught sessions in the computer lab to introduce students to Microsoft Publisher. Most of the instructional time in the computer lab was one-on-one time, with both teachers rotating around the room to provide guidance and answer students' questions. During the introductory session, Johanna taught students the following approaches for working with the software:

- how to find and select templates for their article;
- how to resize the page to change the layout of the text;
- how to change the font to capture attention with the headline and distinguish it from the byline; and
- how to find pictures on the Internet and then cut, paste, and resize the pictures into the article.

## Student Engagement and Motivation

The students showed increased motivation, engagement, creativity, curiosity, and collaboration while working on the project. Students selected a range of subjects for their interview. Some of the popular candidates included Bruce Lee, Pele, Coco Chanel, Dane

Cook, Alicia Keys, Tyra Banks, Will Smith, Anne Frank, Muhammed Ali, and Kanye West. They also selected people such as Lil' Wayne, Memo Ochoa, Walt Disney, and Theodore Roosevelt. Students offered several explanations for the selections they made. Most of the students indicated that they selected the person because they admired them or were curious to learn more about the individual. For example, one student who said she liked Angelina Jolie because of her humanitarian work said she learned that Jolie was also a good ambassador.  This student believed the project was fun because she picked her "favorite person to work on." In some instances, students selected interview subjects who were unfamiliar to them, but they selected their subject based on a particular category of interest, namely fashion or entertainment. One student indicated "this project is a fun project to do because you learned a lot about someone you knew nothing about." Another student recommended that other students completing the project should "pick someone you know least about [because] it makes the project work a whole lot more." All of the students said they enjoyed learning about the person they researched.

When students reflected on their work they commented on their motivation, work ethic, and perceptions of the project based on their history with other academic assignments. Seventeen students recommended that other students either "work hard," "stay on task so they'll be able to finish by the last day," "focus on the project," "don't waste time" and "stop complaining and just do it because it will be fun."  One student stated that she liked the project because it allowed the class to be creative. The comments of four students suggest that they did not initially want to do the work because they anticipated it would be difficult or they didn't think they would get any value from it. One student said: "I learned that whatever project you get you should do it not [sic] matter how boring it could be."  Another student said: "I will tell [other students working on this project] to put a lot of effort and to finish it because it's easy."

Twenty-four students, 71% of the participants who commented on their own work ethic during the project said the next time they work on a similar project they wouldn't "waste time" and they would "do good," and two students said they wish they had more time to finish the project.  One student said: "something I learned about myself is I really could do anything I put my mind to."  Some students recommended that others should "put a lot … [of] effort to it and pick someone you are interested in."

The teacher observed that students were excited to share their work with others. Even those students who worked past the deadline for the project approached the teacher to ask if she would still accept the project. In the lab the professor noted that students made recommendations about the layout and pictures being selected by peers and commented "that doesn't go with the interview."

### Teacher Reflection

There was little explicit connection between reading and students' interaction with nonfiction in the study, so although the students had increased interaction with nonfiction text, there was little instruction in that area. Future research would need to place more emphasis on reading and extrapolating information from expository text.

This project can be used to aid in teaching the concept of elaboration. For instance, in many cases students included statements in the interview that left the reader longing for more information.

Teachers should also assign students specific tasks for their daily work on this project. Students should have specific due dates for daily work on the project. This will ensure that each component of the project is completed in a timely manner. For example, students can be advised to complete a minimum of four questions and write headlines on day three of the project. Without these explicit guidelines, some students may not manage time effectively.

One alternative to using Microsoft Publisher is to use Microsoft Word. This word-processing software can be formatted into columns and students can lay out their text in the form of an article.

While working on the project the teacher encountered several challenges, namely limited computer lab access, issues with the printer (e.g., no ink), and few working computers. To overcome these challenges, the teacher asked students to email her their projects. The teacher then printed some projects on her own and forwarded some projects to the university so the professor could print them. The lab sessions were held in the library and not the computer lab classroom.

Rebecca stated that if she were to conduct the project again, she would make the following changes:

1. Teach more writing conventions by incorporating them into the project—schedule more time to review proofreading and editing with students before they publish the final product. This conversation could include a discussion about being an author. Several students forgot to put names on the completed projects. This item should be added to the project checklist.

2. Prep the students more before they go to the computer lab. It is important to ensure that *all* of the students have log-ins for the lab and flash drives, or that the teacher has his or her own system early in the process because it was often difficult to quickly save student work.

3. Plan ahead and have contingencies against unexpected issues. For example, if the computer lab is double-booked or the printers run out of ink, it would be helpful to have a flash drive to save students' work or have them email the work to the teacher. It is also helpful to have students submit their topics as soon as possible. This way the teacher can print out some hard copies of resources to keep in the classroom in case it is not possible to go to the computer lab.

4. Teach students about the genre of newswriting. The students made some formatting errors in completed projects. A formatting cheat sheet and lessons in formatting newspaper articles could help to circumvent this issue.

5.  Use some of the one-on-one conferencing time to help students paraphrase. Some students struggled with vocabulary and had difficulty paraphrasing. These students need help decoding some words from the text and summarizing the information into their own words.

6.  Show the students samples of completed projects at the onset.  This would help convey the overall project concept.

**Conclusions**

Research shows that "engaged adolescents demonstrate internal motivation, self-efficacy, and a desire for mastery" (National Council of Teachers of English, 2007, p. 4). We found that when the students were provided with opportunities to read and write in class, in a variety of genres, and when we addressed their vocabulary needs, students were more engaged and confident as readers, and demonstrated more proficient skills on various literacy assessments.

This project can inform practice in secondary education. The outcomes from this project can highlight the need for reforms in secondary education, curriculum development and implementation, and demonstrate how technology can be a more integral part of teaching and learning in secondary classrooms. The information from this article will also be useful to other university–school partnerships seeking to address the declining results on statewide standardized assessments at the secondary level and to address the increasing number of high school dropouts.

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