

The Power of Collaboration: Connecting the Classroom to the Real World

Heather Tagliaferro
8th Grade Language Arts Teacher, Guilderland Central School District

“The only way to make sense out of change is to plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance.”

Change can be scary. Quite often we find ourselves venturing down an unknown path, unsure of what twists and turns will come our way. This uncertainty brings about questions, anxiety, and for some, a sense of panic. Similar emotions emerged as educators learned of the new Common Core Standards and the push for “College and Career Readiness.” This shift has catapulted educators on a journey to reevaluate their curriculum, approach lessons in innovative ways, and engage in new conversations with colleagues. As these new tasks are set before us, many are taken on a rollercoaster of emotions experiencing hesitation to begin a new endeavor. What many often forget are the beautiful and exciting lessons that journeys and the change that surfaces can teach us. My journey this year began with a conversation, and what flourished was an inspiring experience that taught me to never be afraid to join the dance.

The catalyst of my journey was a collection of letters I received on the first day of school. Instead of launching my year off lecturing to my 115 eighth graders about what is expected of them, I turned the tables and asked them what lessons they hoped to learn. The honest, expressive, and sometimes curt responses that stared back at me started the path we would take together. They asked to become better writers, understand grammar, expand their vocabularies, and feel more comfortable with research. Sharing these desires with the rest of my colleagues sparked a series of conversations that centered on integrating our students’ requests with the Common Core Standards. Learning of the C-SPAN Student Cam contest was the inspiration for a United States Constitution research project that immersed our students not only in research, but vocabulary and vital life lessons. This immersion not only allowed us to strengthen the skills required by the Common Core Standards, but to help build the bridge to real world texts.

My Social Studies colleague and I decided to debut the project by asking our students to break down selections of the United States Constitution. To outline our introductory lesson, we used the reading standards within the Common Core as a guide. It was important to help our students summarize and understand the nonfiction text using comprehension strategies, defining vocabulary, and making connections. Our objectives for this specific lesson were to support students as they developed a deeper understanding of this significant document, make connections between literacy strategies and real world texts, and understand the importance of working cooperatively in a group. Co-teaching this lesson allowed us to use each other’s strengths to execute our goals for the students. Not only was this an opportunity to reinforce vital literacy skills, but a chance for students to see how these strategies can be used in subjects outside Language Arts class. As our lesson unfolded, students felt proud of themselves as they were able to put several of the amendments in their own words and then felt excited to engage in meaningful discussions about their relevancy to everyday life. The result was not only a profound appreciation for portions of this historical text, but also recognition of how subjects that are hundreds of years old can be relevant to life in the 21st century. To continue building connections to the Constitution, we invited our school resource officer to share his experiences with several of the Amendments. This presentation attached a current recognizable face to a historical subject, and initiated many interesting conversations and questions about how police officers and other professionals use the U.S. Constitution every day.

Using the many questions our students had about the Constitution, we asked them to form research groups and decide on which portion of the document they wanted to learn more about. In addition to selecting a topic for their research, students were asked to develop several questions that would focus their research. Students navigated their way through traditional nonfiction texts and digital resources to identify reliable sources and to recognize important information that was relevant to their research questions. Along this research journey, it was important for students to understand these skills and how they can be used for research in a multitude of situations. To achieve this, communication and collaboration with other core subject teachers resulted in incorporating the same vocabulary and research strategies among other activities and projects. In working together, students were able to make connections in research, vocabulary, literacy, and technology with their diverse interests and subject areas.

My Social Studies colleague and I teamed with the Library Media Specialists, Reading teacher, and Media director to walk students through the research process and share with them their options for final products. The writing requirements within the Common Core Standards focus not only on traditional forms of writing, but they also incorporate technology and other forms of digital media. Therefore, as our team worked together to develop project options for students we found it important to include conventional nonfiction writing and elements of technology for students to put together and share what they learned. Having options for the way in which students would present and share their research was important to engage the wide variety of learning styles. Our demographic, as with many districts, is comprised of students who come from a range of backgrounds, academic abilities and interests. Therefore, weaving options throughout the entire process allowed all students to be active participants, who could learn from their research and each other. The Media Director shared with students their first option, which was to submit a video to the C-SPAN Student Cam contest. Students would need to meet and follow several specific requirements, including interviews and incorporating C-SPAN footage. For those students not interested in participating in the contest, we put together and presented a modified version as option 2, using the same topic, but different requirements. Students were introduced to several forms of technology, such as Glogster, Voicethread, and creating websites through Google Applications to present their research, if they selected the second option. All of these programs asked students to not only navigate their way through a new form of technology, but to also select important facts, images, and opinions to include in their presentation.

Four months later we celebrated our experiences by sharing our final products. Groups proudly stood in front of their classmates and presented what their research unfolded. They discussed the historical background of the amendment, connections to current events and information taken away from interviews. As students reflected on this process, they wrote about the important academic lessons they learned, what they were most proud of, and what they felt they need more practice with. What their reflections also shared was what this experience taught them about working with others and managing their time.

Four months devoted to a research project can sound scary. However, as I sat back and watched my students maneuver their way through this process, I was in awe of their energy and dedication to complete a task they were invested in. For each of the lessons they learned about research, writing, technology, and the United States Constitution, I found myself amazed with the power of collaboration and bringing the real world into a classroom. Whether it is four months or forty minutes, the skills included within the Common Core Standards can be integrated in just about any lesson. What becomes important is to weave the skills students are being asked to understand within real world texts and situations. Engaging in conversations with colleagues and being open to

interdisciplinary activities or projects will open endless doors for our students. As educators begin this new journey, we need to be mindful of the beautiful and exciting lessons that change can teach us, and to never be afraid to join the dance.