Make a list of things that you know a little bit about and would like to know more about,” I said. It was the second or third session with my class, and my seniors dutifully made lists. I did, too; my list contained funeral homes and crayon making, among other topics. “Share one,” I asked, and they did, Spencer first. “Pornography.” He waited for a reaction. Mark spoke before I could. “The JFK assassination.” “King Arthur—or cloning,” said Tony, who could run the 100 in 11 seconds. “Creationism and evolution,” said Tim, a debater. “Malpractice,” said Chad, a valedictorian candidate intending to become an orthopedic surgeon.

The others’ topics were as varied as these, from stained glass making, to the moral code, to therapeutic touch. It was only August, and already I was excited about May, when my students would orally present the findings of their year-long I-Search to a panel of adults from the school community. They had listed topics about which they were passionate, the key ingredient in an inquiry project. I didn’t talk much about the research paper then, but I did post a quote I’d found in Making Thinking Visible: “In research, do we want to prove a point, or do we want to discover something?” I was interested in the latter.

The Project

What does a high school diploma mean? What does it signify that a graduate knows and can do? Too often, it is perceived as a birthright by high school students: I’ve put in my 720 days of seat-time, and I’m entitled.

Ted Sizer’s Coalition of Essential Schools has as part of its Ten Common Principles this belief:

[T]he focus of a secondary school program should be on helping students to use their minds well and...a high school graduate should have the ability to show his or her knowledge and skill—to “exhibit” mastery—in a variety of areas deemed important by local and external authorities. This suggests that the high school diploma should signify genuine competence, specifically in the areas of reading, writing and fundamental mathematics.

Principle 6 of the Ten Common Principles goes on to state:

The [secondary school] diploma should be awarded upon a successful final demonstration of mastery for graduation—an “Exhibition.” This Exhibition by the student of his or her grasp of the central skills and knowledge of the school’s program may be jointly administered by the faculty and by higher authorities...The emphasis is on the students’ demonstration that they can do important things.

“Do important things”—if that wasn’t a worthy objective for my class, I didn’t know what was.

The idea of a graduation exhibition interested me as an authentic and meaningful exercise. I wanted to organize my classroom to encompass...
Glenda Bissex writes that teacher research is “a wondering to pursue,” and as I worked with my seniors, I kept returning to several wonderings. I wondered how developing, focusing on, and revising inquiry questions drove the research process. I wondered what would happen to the final written product when students presented their findings orally before the written product was due. I wondered how awareness of audience changed when students presented their research to a panel of adults from the school community whom they do not know. And I wondered how the community would perceive graduating seniors after listening to their research findings. My questions led to more questions, and, as I learned to, as Rainer Maria Rilke advised, “love the questions themselves,” I encouraged my students to do the same. I was stoked. This was going to be the culminating experience of 180 days—90 blocks—7,200 minutes—of intense writing and study.

After our initial brainstorming in August, my students and I experimented informally with the research about once a month. Two tasks that were extremely successful were a “round robin” writing/reading engagement based on a KWL (Knowing, Wanting, Learning) technique, and cubing. In October, for the “K” component of the KWL (Knowing, Wanting, Learning) technique, and cubing. In October, for the “K” component of the KWL, we wrote what we already knew about our topics, however random and insignificant our thoughts were. Bree, who was still exploring topics ranging from violence in schools, to treatment of the elderly, to Vietnam, to the Robert F. Kennedy assassination, wrote “I know that I don’t know a lot about Vietnam. We never seem to cover it in school. I feel ignorant that I don’t know anything. Maybe I should use this project to learn something.”

Next, for the “W” section of the KWL, we wrote what we wanted to know. Banks, who was interested in theories of intelligence, wanted to know why schools were so bad at stimulating creative and original thought. Nick, researching fraternity hazing, wanted to know why people kept joining fraternities when the initiation rituals were so humiliating and dangerous. Chad, focusing on sleep deprivation in medical interns, wanted to know why truck drivers have to keep logs of their sleep hours and doctors do not.

I wondered how awareness of audience changed when students presented their research to a panel of adults from the school community whom they do not know.

After spending about forty minutes on the K and the W, we switched computers, read over what had been written, and wrote reactions to and questions for the writer. Each person responded to two writers, so by the end of the exercise a great deal of information had been shared and processed, which was later referred to over the course of the year. Tim, responding to Spencer’s free write on the differences between pornography and erotica, wrote, “Must be careful for Nicolini’s taboos few as they may be describing orgasms may or may not be appropriate.” Reader responses such as this, while unusual, do alert the writer to potential problems in logic or focus. Doing reader response this early in the research process made it a natural task to do along the way.

In April, when students were drowning in information, we cubed. Cubing combines free writing with classic rhetorical modes, producing much raw material to shape. For ten minutes each, students free wrote in order on each side of the cube, generating six chunks of writing focused in the following modes: description, comparison, association, analysis, application, and argumentation. Depending on their topic, certain sides of the cube worked better than others. For Faye, who was researching quilting...
as a woman’s art form, “arguing for or against” was silly. Likewise, for Jasmine, writing about eating disorders, “applying” them was ludicrous. Still, looking at their topics from these six sides opened up possibilities and angles not considered before. Many used their “associate” side as part of their introductions, since this association tended to be narrative, suggesting ways to hook the reader.

In addition, students used index cards, not in a traditional research sense, but in a “Save the Last Word for Me” manner. With this strategy, adapted from Jerry Harste’s Creating Classrooms for Authors, students wrote a verbatim quote from their readings on one side of an index card and then, on the flip side, their reaction to it—why it was significant, why it struck them, how they might use it in their paper. We had used this technique orally in response to our readings throughout the year, and using it for research was a logical extension. Three by five cards can lead to three by five thoughts, and I wanted to emphasize to students that the purpose of index cards was not to cram as much as possible on them in tiny, cribbed handwriting, but to respond and react to what they were learning.

Two other seniors had their parents call them in sick, then cut all their classes, working in the writing center all day creating HyperStudio stacks to accompany their exhibitions.

Yet, not using index cards in the traditional sense concerned me; I worried that students would lose (or never get in the first place) bibliographic information; I worried that other teachers would look at me as if I were a sham. In Writing with Passion, Tom Romano voiced some of my concerns about the documentation issue:

While reading that first batch of multigenre research papers, I began to get nervous. Scholarly documentation was abysmal . . .

Despite my delight with the papers, part of me felt academically responsible. Was I teaching students to be blithe researchers? Was I promoting a cavalier attitude toward source material once it had been mined? I shuddered and blamed myself. (141)

“Document everything!” I cried so often that students were even starting to document their conferences with me as personal interviews. They cited their Internet sites so thoroughly that anyone could navigate them with ease. And even though their bibliographic entries were collected on Dairy Queen napkins and recycled paper, they learned to get city, publisher, and edition before returning books to the library.

Even though I had been thinking about the exhibitions for months, I delayed actually lining up adult volunteers until a few weeks before. I had scheduled the exhibitions for the week of May 18 and didn’t e-mail my first recruit until May 7 (and that at 6:45 p.m.). The response, with only eleven days advance notice, was overwhelmingly positive. Almost two dozen volunteers accepted my invitation. Exhibitions were originally scheduled for four days from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m., but each night we were there until almost 7:00 p.m. I added a fifth night to accommodate students who weren’t available during the previous week. Four to six adults served on each panel, including teachers, student teachers, counselors, and administrators from Penn High School; professors from Notre Dame and Indiana University, South Bend; classroom teachers from area schools who had participated in the Indiana Teachers of Writing (ITW) Writing Project; members of the Board of School Trustees; members of the business and religious communities; and central office personnel (including the superintendent) from Penn-Harris-Madison and the South Bend Community School Corporations. Coffee, soft drinks, and cookies were their only pay; some people served more than one night.

I deliberately scheduled exhibitions for late in the semester, in part to keep my graduating seniors engaged and focused during this traditional period of restlessness. In fact, the first day of exhibitions was scheduled for senior skip day, the Monday after prom. Despite the fact that they cut during the day, two seniors came in to present at 5:00 p.m. Two other seniors had their parents call them in sick, then cut all their classes, working in the writing
center all day creating HyperStudio stacks to accompany their exhibitions.

It was important to schedule the exhibitions after the regular school day ended. It lent an air of seriousness to the affair by scheduling it after everyone else had gone home, it allowed teachers from other schools to arrive after their work day ended, and it allowed students time to change clothes and set up their visual aids.

The thirty-minute presentation time was sufficient to fully explain the story of the search and the findings, leaving time for questions and answers. Some students were petrified at filling the time, while others asked if they had to leave time for Q & A, since they had so much to say. Most students did run over almost fifteen minutes, even after a five minute warning. While it was obvious that some students had rehearsed and timed themselves, others were less aware of how long—or short—a half hour was. For example, Jill started her exhibition on environmental pollution with a read aloud from Dr. Seuss’s *The Lorax.* (We had worked with children’s books and read alouds during the school year, and I was thrilled that she incorporated this into her presentation.) However, Jill hadn’t timed herself and, after reading for eight minutes, stopped and said, “I’ll just skip to the end so you get the point.” What I thought would have been an instinctive part of preparation—timing the read aloud—wasn’t, and it hurt her overall presentation.

**Picture One: Gabrielle**

Gabrielle’s grandfather was dying as she introduced herself to the panel at 4:30 on Wednesday afternoon. Her panel—an English professor from Notre Dame, a government teacher, an assistant principal, and two English teachers—listened attentively as she described her search on world religions. “I started off wanting to compare all world religions,” she said, “but realized maybe just two or three of the big ones would do.” She smiled, her face belying the sadness she felt. During her research, she told me she was using a lot of her grandfather’s books. “When we had to put him in the nursing home,” she said, “we put all his stuff in our basement. He has this whole series on religion . . .” —here she paused—“. . . and they all smell like his house used to.”

She gestured at the poster she had made to her right. It was a huge triangle, divided into three smaller triangles, one for Christianity, one for Buddhism, and one for Hinduism. “I call this my ‘temple of truth,’” she said. “As I read, I realized that it would be a good idea not to focus on the differences between the religions, but to look at their similarities. And there are many.” She went on to discuss the principle deities of each religion, their holy books, and their beliefs in the afterlife. She fielded questions expertly, clapping her hands in front of her as she spoke, thanking the panelists for such good questions. Articulate and smooth, she was nearly flawless in her presentation. When I hugged her before she left, I told her she appeared very calm. “I put on a good front,” she said. Her grandfather died just a few hours later.

**Picture Two: Lynn**

Toward the end of Gabrielle’s presentation, I looked over at Lynn on the other side of the writing center, who was scheduled next. She was doing jumping jacks. I caught her eye and she smiled, visibly nervous. On more than one occasion throughout the year Lynn had told me she hated speaking in front of people. I was sympathetic but determined not to waive this requirement for her. “Think of it as a conversation with interested, literate people,” I told her. “They wouldn’t be here if they didn’t want to be, and they are genuinely interested in your search.” Hers was an interesting one, too. Originally, she was going to research stained glass making, and she intended to interview artisans and even make a piece herself. She had been to Chartres and wanted to look at the windows in several churches in the area. She was excited about it, and I was interested to see what she’d come up with.

Then, in early April, she asked if it was too late to change her topic. “Never,” I said, and Lynn explained that she had seen an article in *Parade* magazine the Sunday before. I inwardly grimaced, judgmental despite myself; *Parade* didn’t strike me as a particularly scholarly source. She told me about the article on Victoria Woodhull. I had seen it, too, and I had to admit that I was equally interested in the first female stockbroker on Wall Street. Lynn went on, saying she wasn’t sure how much information she’d be able to find, but she knew she needed more than just the *Parade* piece. A few days later, still without much research, she asked me what to do. “Maybe you could expand it to include other suffragettes, like, like . . .” I struggled for a name. “Well, like somebody,” I laughed, and reminded her of her writ-
ers’ notebook entry on Mary Wollstonecraft several months earlier. “And that Promiscuities book you were reading in the fall—maybe your topic is really about women in society in general, and not just one woman.” Lynn nodded her head and went off to search the Internet.

As it turned out, she learned a lot. She camped out in Borders and Barnes and Noble and took notes on the hardback books she couldn’t afford to buy. She taped one of Woodhull’s speeches, then decided not to play it. “You can listen to it after I leave,” she said, visibly shaken. She made a transparency of Woodhull’s sepia-toned portrait and projected it on the screen during her talk. She mentioned several times how nervous she was, and I was afraid she’d hyperventilate. “I became interested in Woodhull because of her ‘free love’ beliefs,” she began, and giggled awkwardly. Then, as she spoke, a remarkable thing occurred. She started talking about Woodhull as if she were a friend of hers and told of her quirks and idiosyncrasies as if she had witnessed them herself.

Lynn’s story is significant
in that she opted to change her
topic based on a tiny shred
of evidence, stumbled across
when she wasn’t even looking.

The content of her talk so interested the panelists that we naturally interrupted to ask questions, and, as Lynn speculated on these, she became even more relaxed. She told of Woodhull’s scandalous affair with Harriet Beecher Stowe’s brother and how she was an embarrassment to the women at Seneca Falls, such as Susan B. Anthony. “I really don’t know why she was so powerful,” Lynn finally admitted after telling us about Woodhull’s bad public persona. When I told Lynn she had about five minutes to wrap up her presentation, she was shocked at how quickly the time had gone. She wrote in her reflection, “My best paper this year wasn’t even a paper at all—it was my presentation on Victoria Woodhull. I still can’t believe I actually made it through it.”

Lynn’s story is significant in that she opted to change her topic based on a tiny shred of evidence, stumbled across when she wasn’t even looking. While she had been interested in her previous topic, she challenged herself to research one for which she had far less information. While the act of public speaking terrified her, accomplishing this task meant more to her than anything else we had done all year. She will carry this success with her, when she goes off to study pharmacy in the fall, and she knows to do jumping jacks to calm her before an oral presentation.

**Picture Three: Mark**

After Mark read *Othello* in February, he wrote a paper on how Darth Vader fit the Aristotelian definition of a tragic hero. (His mother told me how he never took off his Darth Vader Halloween costume when he was little and how he would sneak up on her in the kitchen, when all she’d hear was the sound of his breath through the plastic helmet mask.) “Luke, I am your father,” his classmates teased him when he argued about Vader’s tragic flaw.

The summer between his freshman and sophomore years, Mark read the entire Warren Commission Report on the JFK assassination. He had seen Oliver Stone’s film and read several other accounts of the investigation. I was pleased that he had so much prior knowledge to draw from but, reverting to a regressive-teacher-control mode that surprised and startled me, worried that his senior project wouldn’t require him to do anything new, that he’d only revisit material he’d already read and thought about.

I was an idiot.

Mark brought his parents and older brother to his exhibition, and I regretted not inviting everyone’s parents. They hung up his posters and drawings on two portable chalkboards. There were a lot of them—a diagram of the motorcade route, a quote from a man who was in the military with Oswald, and a synopsis of the “magic bullet” theory. Mark fiddled with the VCR, checking the cuing on each of the four videotapes he’d brought in. He checked the audio on the cassette player, and he rolled the two chalkboards over from where he had prepared them, turning one so that the writing faced us.

And then he started to speak.
I’m pretty sure my jaw dropped. He was so confident, so articulate, so focused. Not that I hadn’t seen evidence of this in the previous thirty-two weeks, but this was a Mark whom I normally didn’t see. He spoke forcefully, emphasizing certain points with a clenched fist. To illustrate the magic bullet theory, he had his mother and brother portray JFK and Governor Connolly. They sat in desk chairs, one in front of the other, Connolly’s right arm on his lap, JFK’s on the car door. Using a pointer, Mark showed the trajectory the bullet would have had to take to cause all the victims’ wounds. “And then it takes a forty-five degree turn, landing in the governor’s arm.” We applauded this wonderful dramatization, which helped us to visualize the scene. “I thought I already knew everything about the JFK assassination,” one of the panelists wrote in her evaluation. “I was wrong.”

To illustrate the magic bullet theory, he had his mother and brother portray JFK and Governor Connolly.

Later, Mark’s mom told me how he had to repeat second grade because he stuttered so badly. “Thank you for letting me pursue a topic I really wanted to,” he wrote in his reflection, and I mourned the fact that it took him until the last month of high school to get to talk about his passion. I felt foolish again about being worried he’d “take the easy way out” with a topic he already knew so much about. I vowed not to make the same mistake again.

Picture Four: Bridget

Bridget was always sick. She received allergy shots twice a week. She had insomnia. She stressed out over her leading role in Mame, her AP Chemistry class, her choir rehearsal. She is brilliant and beautiful and destined for greatness, if she can just keep from getting sick so often.

“I know a lot about illness,” she wrote in August. “Maybe I can do something about medication and diagnosis and prescription drugs.”

It sounded like the basis for an I-Search—a topic she felt deeply connected to. She brought in a book by Dr. Andrew Weil on spontaneous healing.

“Would something like this be okay?” she asked, trepidation in her voice.

“Sure,” I replied, “What do you mean?”

“Oh, something about alternative healing techniques besides drugs.”

“You mean like treating the causes instead of the symptoms?” I asked.

“Yeah, I think,” she replied, tentatively. “Are you sure this is OK?” And she was off.

Now, almost six months later, she had seven adults, including the superintendent and a systems analyst, lying prone on the floor as she talked us through yoga relaxation breathing exercises. Earlier, she’d plugged in her aroma therapy machine and brewed herbal tea for us to sip as she explained the similarities between taking a car to the mechanic and caring for our bodies. Just as I started to get a little nervous that her entire presentation would smack of what might be interpreted as New Age mumbo-jumbo, she recited statistics on over-the-counter drugs and wellness issues. Her theatrical training paid off, as she used her space well, addressing all members of her panel, only occasionally referring to her 5 × 8 cards on which she had pasted key points, printed in eighteen point type for easy reading.

“Thank you for letting Bridget research that topic,” her mother said to me at graduation. “Did she tell you she can sleep through the night without her mask now?” Bridget hadn’t, but I was thrilled that a school project had influenced her personal life to such an extent.

Gabrielle, Lynn, Mark, and Bridget would have done very well with a traditional research paper. They knew how to cite their sources and could consult a handbook to create a works cited page with no problem. Skilled at the game of school, all of them would have dutifully completed the assignment, perhaps waiting until the weekend before to write the final product, but cranking out perfectly acceptable pieces on their topics. They may have even been able to infuse a bit of their voice into their papers, and under no circumstances would they have used “I.” If they had just simply written a paper, the associate principal wouldn’t have spilled tea on his pants, Mark’s parents could’ve stayed
home, Lynn wouldn’t have almost hyperventilated, and Gabrielle wouldn’t have had to think so much about her dying grandfather.

But to have not given them the chance to do what they did would have been to deny them the right to best represent what they had learned in senior English.

**Picture Five: Spencer**

In *Workshop 4*, Thomas Newkirk writes about what he calls “failure stories”:

> I’m interested in the silences in our narratives as teachers, the things we are reluctant to discuss . . . As I read the literature on whole language/writing process classrooms, I wonder if we are not creating the role of “super teacher,” one more ideal, without cracks, that creates a sense of inadequacy in all of us. Are there silences in the narratives we tell of our whole language/writing process classrooms? Are we telling everything? Do these consistently upbeat success stories capture the emotional underlife of teaching? I think not . . . There is an emotional turbulence and a frequency of failure in my own teaching that I do not see reflected in many accounts, including ones I have written or edited myself. . . . [We need to] create forums for telling failure stories. We all have them. Let’s talk about them. (21–27)

And so I should probably write about Spencer.

Spencer, as a human being, is hardly a failure. Having scored over 1400 on his SATs, he proved he could psyche out this school thing and in his senior year decided to drop AP calculus to be on the school newspaper staff. (He still took AP English and AP chemistry.) In addition, he spent an afternoon a week at the *South Bend Tribune*, editing the high school-student-produced “Next Generation Page.” In the spring, he attended most school board meetings, speaking at some—one about the plan for random drug testing. (He was not in favor of it.) He was a deep thinker, interested in philosophical issues that most eighteen-year-olds aren’t even aware of, yet his exhibition was dissatisfying to both him and me.

He was scheduled for 6:30, the last of four exhibitions that day, and he arrived by 5:00. I noticed he was wearing the same T-shirt and shorts he had worn to school that day, which in itself wasn’t bad, although many seniors elected to wear khakis and a dress shirt, or even a suit. He immediately sat down at a computer to work. At 6:30 I told him we were running a little bit late and asked what he was doing. “A handout for you guys,” he said.

At 6:40 I told him we were ready. “Wait a minute,” he said. At 6:45 I made large, sweeping motions, gesturing him over to us. “Wait a minute,” he yelled. At 6:50 I went back and said, “Now!” He cursed about the “damn printer,” which was cutting off his margins, and I restrained the urge to remark on how his failure to plan did not constitute an emergency on my part.

As he distributed his handout, Spencer apologized to the panel for making them wait. Then, as we skimmed his handout (which, I noticed, was oddly formatted, with bizarre indentations and tabs), Spencer announced, “Larry Flynt has done more for the First Amendment than any other man.”

Spencer is probably one of the smartest students to ever get a D in AP English.

We’d worked on attention-getting openings in our writing all year, and Spencer’s “hook” certainly got the attention of the government teacher serving on his panel, who sort of thought Thomas Jefferson did an awful lot for the First Amendment. Likewise, the English teacher with two small daughters also looked a little startled. The geography teacher, known for his liberal politics, scribbled something on his notepad.

Spencer could’ve pulled it off, actually. He had a good presentation style and a sympathetic audience, willing to be convinced. Yet, he wasn’t prepared. It appeared his primary resource was the Woody Harrelson film about the Hustler publisher, *The People vs. Larry Flynt*. Earlier in the year, I’d tried to steer him toward checking out Robert Mapplethorpe’s photography, and the National Endowment for the Arts funding guidelines, and how some people felt the NEA shouldn’t fund artists who created what they deemed “pornography.” I suggested interviewing judges, or Notre Dame law professors, or strippers at the Kitty Kat Club on South Michigan Street about their First Amendment rights, but he wasn’t interested. His panelists
gave him some sources for enriching his paper, but
he didn’t seek them out.

Earlier in the semester, he’d written an im-
passioned, five-page response to a Margaret Atwood
essay on pornography, focusing specifically on the
connection between violence and sexuality, but he
didn’t include any of this in his final paper. Written
from about midnight to 4:00 a.m. on the night before
grades were due, it was about four pages of pseudo-
intellectual ramblings, with no citations, parentheti-
cal or otherwise. “Yeah, I never really got to what I
wanted to say,” he said after graduation on Sunday.

Spencer commented to his classmates that
they should be really well prepared for their exhibi-
tions. Making this admission was significant; earlier
in the year he would have been inclined to place
the blame on the panelists or me. Yet, just a few
days away from graduation, Spencer knew he was
responsible for his education and realized there are
some things you can bluff your way through and
some things you cannot.

Spencer is probably one of the smartest stu-
dents to ever get a D in AP English. I would have
liked to see his inquiry project develop into a true
research piece; I would have liked to see his opinion
blended with his findings. I was pleased that he felt
comfortable enough in the writing community we
had created to explore a controversial topic but dis-
appointed that it never progressed beyond the ini-
tial shock value stage. He will probably produce
well-organized, logical arguments for college classes,
regardless of not writing a research paper his senior
year. He wrote in my yearbook that he learned a lot
during our year together, and I think he did—and
learning is not always best measured by pen and
paper tasks—or even oral presentations.

The Close of the Exhibition

So what? Who cares? What did we learn?

That students, given choice, response, and
time, can produce writing that exhibits engagement
and passion.

That when teachers “get out of the way,” stu-
dents can surprise with their investment in a project.

That seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds can
speak knowledgeably to strangers about topics that
interest them.

And that graduation exhibitions are an ex-
cellent way for students to show what they know
and can do. In May, 1999, 150 seniors presented ex-
hibitions; by the millennium, perhaps all 700 Penn
graduates will.

Perhaps the best praise for exhibitions
comes from another graduating senior in another
English class. “What are you doing to Banks?” he
complained to me in mid-May. “I keep wanting him
to come up to the lake, and he keeps saying he
needs to work on his exit project.”

I just smiled.

Works Cited

Flower, Linda, David L. Wallace, Linda Norris, and Re-
Harste, Jerome C., and Kathy G. Short, with Carolyn Burke.
Newkirk, Thomas, ed. Workshop 4: The Teacher as Re-

MARY B. NICOLINI is director of the writing center at Penn
High School, Mishawaka, Indiana.