Voices from the Middle, Volume 23 Number 3, March 2016

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Teachers and Students as Researchers and Investigators

What does research and investigation mean to a classroom teacher? While the answer to this question involves complex analysis, we believe in summary it means teachers thinking about instruction in ways that involve continually scrutinizing the instructional pathways they design to promote, illustrate, and ensure the excitement of lifelong learning for every student. To accomplish the complexity of such empowering instruction, teachers must be continually excited about all of the new personal learning that occurs as they design and revamp instruction.

An example of learning that laid the groundwork for continued student and teacher learning occurred in a seventh-grade mathematics class at Health Sciences Middle School as teacher Staci Benak engaged her students in a project that involved far more than mathematical calculations. Although the initial plan was well conceived, her continuous assessment of her students and her instruction empowered her students to flex their investigative muscles.

To begin, Benak gave students a set amount of money and a pseudo description of themselves as an adult head of household. Each description included their job titles and information about the composition of their families, including the number of children and the income of a spouse. Students were tasked to find a location in the United States where they could live comfortably, build a home, and describe the life they had created. In addition to their floor plan, they also had to design the frame of their house using three different geometric shapes, create the surface net for their frame, and build a model of the home, including a cross section of the 3-D shapes so that an observer could see the inside of the home, which included the floor plan. In the end, they had to make sure they budgeted correctly, which meant understanding cost of living factors. They had ten years to pay for their homes.

The specific lesson purpose of this project-based learning experience was to budget, design, and build a house for your pseudo character that included a floor plan, a 3-D model, and cost. The essential question, How does where you live influence how you live? was studied cross-curricularly by these students, who loved the engagement and challenge of this digital research project that honed their skills of inquiry, planning, and investigation.

They were led by questions that naturally arose as they investigated cost of living throughout the United States, budget planning, features of various geographic locales, how climate in various states affects the type of construction materials that can be used to build a home, and the cost per square foot of building a home in various parts of the country. At the conclusion, some were very excited to move to places with lower costs of living, but they realized that to get a bigger home for their money they would have to exchange nearness to the ocean and a glorious year-round San Diego climate. For many, this was their first realization that life is a “give and get” experience.
These middle schoolers flexed their investigative muscles as they explored the world around them. Ms. Benak provided the guidance they needed to become excited about creating their own next lives as she taught them the mathematics skills they needed to succeed with this project. She enlisted collegial support by inviting the social studies teacher to encourage them to explore the climate conditions of various regions of the United States and the English teacher to help craft their written language into a profile of their next lives. Throughout the project, students became mindful of just how far a dollar would go as they became investigative researchers who came to know and use mathematics, social studies, and literacy skills as real-world consumers and citizens.

We share this example because it illustrates that learning inside the classroom must prepare students for their lives outside of the classroom. “Indeed, the skills and understandings students are expected to demonstrate have wide applicability outside the classroom or workplace.” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 3). The articles in this issue of Voices offer additional examples of how teachers are designing instruction to support students’ learning how to investigate an idea that morphs into additional questions and results in their gaining perspectives about themselves in the world they are inheriting and hopefully enriching by their citizenry.

To begin this issue, Cynthia Martelli and Patricia Watson invite us into an eighth-grade classroom where we witness students engaged in studying the self-initiated question, What are common characteristics of resiliency shared by human beings in the past, present, and in our own lives? How these students came to a place where they could initiate and investigate this question and how their teacher became a designer of instruction who encouraged and supported student exploration is the story being told.

In the process of becoming independent learners, we revise our questions, edit our presentations, and start many new paths. Jeana Hrepich shares the pitfalls and gains that occur for students when they are supported through blended learning experiences that invite them to codesign the direction of their research investigations. James Damico, Michelle Honeyford, and Alexandra Panos share an article that illustrates through example how a seventh-grade teacher promoted student inquiry as a foundation for students’ learning that involved viewing commercials, websites, YouTube videos, research reports, and paper texts to investigate topics of relevance to them. What is so unique about these two articles is that the teachers being highlighted are also guiding their own learning paths to become knowledgeable about technology in order to create blended learning experiences. The takeaway from these articles is that new learning is an exciting struggle for teachers who are trying to empower students’ use of digital pathways, especially in middle school when many of the students are already gamers and digital explorers. The question becomes how to harness all of these digital skills for lifelong investigation.

Teachers also often pave new paths of learning for themselves and their students as they learn how to introduce students to a blend of genres. Vicky Zygouris-Coe and Yolanda Hood illustrate how to use mystery and suspense young adult literature to promote learning and inquiry. The multiple examples they share will compel you to give this genre a try. KaaVonia Hinton, Yonghee Suh, Maria O’Hearn and Lourdes Colón-Brown also encourage us, through their excellent example, to expose students to historical nonfiction as a way to blend literacy and social studies learning. Empowered learning through exposure to the genre of poetry is shown by seventh-grade teacher Stephanie Gibbons who thoroughly describes a lesson that used poetry to invite students to become a community of writers who felt empowered with the belief that they were indeed writers.

The success of all of the powerful instruction being described involves continuous assessment of students and instructional pathways. Evelyn Ford-Connors, Dana Robinson, and Jeanne Paratore help us to remain mindful that con-
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Continuous assessment must happen if students are to be engaged in cognitive work that promotes vast learning. They describe how student talk is one of the best ways to assess what students are learning, identify questions they have that may be roadblocks to their learning, and note skill areas where they may need very explicit scaffolded instruction. They view the dialogic exchanges among students as the foundation for the instruction that should occur in order to move every student to become self-empowered as scholars who can eventually take charge of their own growing bases of information. We hope you find that these articles move you to a deeper level of instructional planning; one that promotes your study of instruction in ways that end with the empowerment of your students knowing how to fund their own learning experiences.

Reference

Call for Nominations: James Moffett Award

NCTE’s Conference on English Education offers this award to support teacher research projects that further the spirit and scholarship of James Moffett. Moffett, a great champion of the voices of K–12 teachers, focused on such ideas as the necessity of student-centered curricula, writing across the curriculum, alternatives to standardized testing, and spiritual growth in education and life. This award is offered in conjunction with the National Writing Project.

Applications for the Moffett Award should be in the form of a proposal for a project that one or more K–12 classroom teachers wish to pursue. The proposal must include

- A cover page with the applicant’s name, work and home telephone numbers and addresses, email address, a brief profile of the applicant’s current school and students, and a brief teaching history (when and where the applicant has taught).
- A proposal (not more than 5 pages, double-spaced, 12-point font) that includes an introduction and rationale for the work (What is the problem or question to be studied? How might such a project influence the project teacher’s practice and potentially the practice of other teachers? Why is such a project important?); a description of the connection to the spirit and scholarship of James Moffett; initial objectives for the study (realizing these might shift during the project); a clear, focused project description that includes a timeline (What will be done? When? How? By whom?); a method of evaluating the project (What indicators might reviewers note that suggest the work was valuable to the researcher and to other teachers?); and a narrative budget (How will the money be spent?).
- A letter of support from someone familiar with the applicant’s teaching and perceived ability to implement and assess the proposed project.

Moffett Award winners receive a certificate designating the individual as the 2016 recipient of the CEE Moffett Award and a monetary award (up to $1,000) to be used toward implementation of the proposed project.

Submit proposals to CEE Moffett Award, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1010 or cee@ncte.org, Attn: CEE Administrative Liaison. Proposals must be postmarked by September 19, 2016. Proposals will be judged on such criteria as the strength of the connection to James Moffett’s scholarship and the perceived value and feasibility of the project.