

The R.O.A.D. Project

By Lesley B. Preddy

A few serendipitous interactions helped me have one of the most exciting years of my career. Through a series of fortunate events, conversations, and meetings, I was part of developing a collaborative project with the eighth grade Language Arts Department. 'The R.O.A.D. I Traveled' (Research, Observe, Analyse, Dis-cover) incorporated the 8th grade Language Arts Department year-long theme of 'Who am I?' with genealogy/ family history, community, and self-discovery. Although the concept of this unit was initiated by the classroom teachers, it required the involvement of the school librarian, the Indiana State Library, the Indiana Historical Society, and students' families. It took a village to handle the planning, design, implementation, and reinforcement of skills, but it was incredibly rewarding for all involved.

Setting priorities

During the brainstorming and planning stages, there were many philosophical, education discussions. We scrutinised the theme, the standards, and the experiences we wanted the students to sample through this unit. We agreed that family involvement was crucial, but could be challenging for our economically disadvantaged community.

We agreed that students should engage in learning in ways different from their past experiences, yet critical for moving forward as 21st century learners and information literate citizens. We wanted students to move beyond Google and learn other tools and resources available through the community and the Internet. Students needed to be pushed out of their comfort zone. Guided learning needed to conclude with students capable of using their new information literacy skills to develop a personal project plan and share their final project at a community Project Fair (see Figure 1).

Unit Learning Objective: Each student will research his/her family history in order to construct a personal research goal.

Unit Common Core Standards:

Common Core 8.W.7: Conduct short research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question), drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions that allow for multiple avenues of exploration.

Common Core 8.W.8: Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, using search terms effectively; assess the credibility and accuracy of each source; and quote or paraphrase the data and conclusions of others while avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.

Figure 1: Learning Objective

Family engagement

When working with secondary students, it is often a struggle for parents and caregivers to find time to be actively and meaningfully engaged in their child's learning. Many have busy lives and poor economic conditions which makes it even more difficult. This unit, however, provided an ideal opportunity for students to practice their people and interviewing skills with family members in a very non-threatening way.

Students received training and practice conducting interviews, then began practising real-world interviews with a simple personal history base with their mother and father or other significant adults. Students used a personal interview format customised for the project and adapted with permission from the [Purdue University 4-H Youth Development genealogy project manual](#). Respecting home situations, students interviewed whomever they had a pre-existing relationship with and who could give them the needed information. We did not want this to be an uncomfortable experience and understood that some home situations did not allow for learning about biological parents, so students in those cases could interview grandparents, adoptive parents, custodial relatives or caregivers, step-parents, or other persons appropriate to their situation.

These preliminary interview skills segued into a higher-level Family History Interview. In this later phase of the unit, students developed the following in-depth learning about formal interviewing:

- interview skills,
- interview etiquette,
- utilising technology to interview long distance,
- developing interview questions, and
- making an interview appointment.

They learned about oral history and how to investigate finding the family historians. Each student was expected to develop an interview plan, conduct an interview, complete an interview reflection, and construct a family history reflective essay based on all the family history information they had gathered.



Outreach

Taking students to a higher level of thinking meant giving them experiences with community resources, but the students weren't the only ones learning. Most of the educators involved had never completed family history research, nor did they know what resources would be available to students. Working closely with state librarians in the genealogy department was crucial to the unit's success. First, we corresponded through phone calls and emails to verify how receptive they would be to working with young people. They were ready, willing, and able, so we met face to face to brainstorm what the educators wanted and needed the students to do versus what the state librarians knew, from professional experience, was feasible. We then continued the planning process through follow-up emails and phone correspondence. It was exciting to learn about opportunities the State Library could provide and their willingness to work so carefully with us.

We didn't want the only teaching voice for students to be those they already knew from within the school. We wanted students to realise that there are field experts throughout the community.

We wanted students to realise that there are field experts throughout the community.

Nearly a dozen videos, created by the Indiana State Library on our behalf, were incorporated into the lessons. Due to time constraints in schools and student attention spans, we asked for each video to be brief and to the point. The videos built common background knowledge before the lesson began and helped students gain a foundational understanding. For example, before beginning work on primary and secondary sources, students viewed a two-minute video from the Indiana State Library on 'Family Stories'. These videos are available at the [Indiana State Library YouTube channel](#).

Students had no knowledge of, nor experience with, utilising the 'Ask a Librarian' feature available through many library websites. As educators, we discussed the fact that information was so readily available to students, the phenomena of the myth of misinformation, and how we needed to recognise the traits of this generation. Students today want an answer, and often the easiest and fastest answer is what they consider the best. Therefore, we needed to have them sample the experience of consulting an expert without having to put forth much effort (because they won't) and without having to leave the comfort of their home, smart-phone, or computer (because they often don't or can't).

Once these truths about the student population were acknowledged and embraced, the solution was simple. Students learned about the difficulty of locating and validating information found on the Internet. We discussed how difficult it can

... we discussed the fact that information was so readily available to students, the phenomena of the myth of misinformation . .

be to visit an expert for help or get transportation to a library to get help from an information specialist, a librarian. Within our community, as well as many others throughout the country, residents can consult a librarian from anywhere using 'Ask a Librarian'. For example, through [The Indianapolis Public Library](#), residents can consult a librarian through a web-based form, phone,

text message, or in person. For this project, students used their school-provided email account and the [Indiana State Library](#) 'Ask a Librarian' web to ask about the meaning and origin of their surnames. We worked with the state librarians in advance to ensure they would be prepared for the glut of over 400 inquiries they would receive in just five school days and the quick response turnaround required for the unit to progress efficiently.

Our students also needed experiential knowledge that there are community resources. They needed to see that there are people out in the community willing to help, that everything is not yet digitised, and that there are other resources outside of the Internet. We, therefore, coordinated a field trip to the [Indiana State Library](#). Most of our students had never been to the State Library or even knew of its existence, which made this a powerful experience, changing how students thought of information retrieval, learning, and their community. Through the field trip, students toured the Indiana State Library building, a historical landmark, and received formal training on using ancestry.com from genealogy research experts. They researched what the world was like the day they were born through historical newspapers on microfilm.

Students also learned from historians and preservationists at the Eugene and Marilyn Glick Indiana History Center. During the field trip, students participated in phenomenal workshops, which aligned with the unit goal and objectives and learned through hands-on experiences how to preserve family documents and interpret historical photos. The Indiana Historical Society's (<http://www.indianahistory.org/> teachers-students) 'Previsit Information Packet' describes the youth group activities as:

- W. Brooks Fortune History Lab: Take on the role of a conservator and participated in a hands-on paper-mending activity in our History Lab, where students learn how science and history work together in the field of conservation.
- INvestigation Stations: Do some detective work with primary sources at our Investigation Stations. Facilitators will help students discover clues in photographs and documents to solve mysteries of the past (2012).

NEW CHALLENGES HAVE REWARDS

Suzanne Walker, Children's Services Consultant, Indiana State Library, reflects on the collaborative efforts:

The partnership with Perry Meridian Middle School was a challenging and rewarding experience for the Indiana State Library. We are always looking for ways to connect members of the Indiana public with our resources so having the Perry 8th graders and their educators come visit our online resources as well as our physical building was an opportunity we did not want to miss. A project of this size and scale required many meetings over the phone, lots of emails, and many meetings at our building with our staff. Our staff also had the added challenge of working with 8th graders – a demographic who, sadly, is not a typical patron group for us. The first challenge was making the videos, and even though this was not something we'd done much of in the past, many staff worked together to film, write scripts, and edit the videos as well as upload them and add them to our website. The most challenging and rewarding aspect for our staff was the visits. We have a new respect for the wonderful educators who work with middle schoolers every day. Most of our staff was worn out by the time the days were done, having limited experience working with youth. We were excited to share our resources. We were thrilled to have an influx of people into our building and we welcome other groups who might be interested in setting up similar projects with us (Suzanne Walker, email message with the author, January 20, 2014).

Conclusion

The finale of the unit was a personal research plan that culminated in sharing their independent personal family research project at a Project Fair for the community. The Project Fair was an exciting evening for families. Students set up a project exhibit with displays and oral presentations where they shared what they had learned about themselves and their family. Siblings, parents, grandparents, extended family, school district staff and administration, community members, and other stakeholders all attended. The crowd was beyond our wildest dreams.

This project was so robust and rewarding for staff, students, and families that I could spend pages sharing everything the students learned and did. The focus, however, was community engagement. Moving the lesson beyond the school walls, incorporating community resources, and involving families took our students and teachers to a higher level of digital and community citizenship.

Editor's Note:

This article was first published in *School Library Monthly* Volume 30, Number 8, May-June 2014.

Permission granted by Libraries Unlimited to be republished online in *Synergy* Volume 12 No. 2. Copyrighted by LU2014.

Leslie Preddy is the school librarian at Perry Meridian Middle School. She has been awarded the national School Library Media Program of the Year and was a 2010 finalist for Indiana Teacher of the Year. Her latest book is *School Library Makerspaces: Grades 6-12* (Libraries Unlimited, 2013). Email: lpreddy@perryschools.org.