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# Young Students Are Learning the Research Process

Temple Jellicorse Halsey

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Effective teaching means that we must periodically climb out on a limb and risk cutting it off behind us. Six years ago I had reached a level of frustration that pushed me onto such a limb. Perhaps other librarians who put a great deal of effort into teaching library skills only to discover that skills taught are not necessarily learned within an applicable process will recognize the symptoms. The cure for me has been to develop a research process within which I teach the skills as they apply.

Although I had spent weeks teaching elementary school students how to use library tools, and the classroom teacher had covered the language units for outlining, the children continued to abstract or paraphrase encyclopedia articles when assigned a report to prepare. For my part, clever simulation games had broken down the skills for using the card catalog, *Children's Magazine Guide*, almanacs, atlases, and specialized encyclopedias and dictionaries into their most minute parts. Testing showed that most children had become skilled in the "how" of using these tools. Of course, I was teaching relevant-in-context skills for I continually pointed out that these tools would help with the upcoming BIG report.

When the students entered the reference center in small groups to begin the report, they grabbed the first available encyclopedia, read a paragraph, wrote something, read, wrote, etc. When I insisted that they use an additional source, the new information was tacked onto the end of the accumulated paragraphs. Since no one had taught young students to take notes, this process was not surprising; the disturbing finding was that they were not thinking of combining types of materials although they had learned to use them.

"What is wrong with these students," I asked in some frustration one afternoon. Since I usually try to avoid this type of teacher's lounge discussion, I left feeling more depressed than ever. Placing the blame on the students was not helping me

become an effective teacher. But how to change? What to change? All of those games and gadgets (i.e., the phones that spin, asking questions and giving answers, etc.) had to go. That decision was painful, but the frightening thought was that I hadn't a clue as to their replacement. I had learned that simulation is artificial. Students seemed to enjoy the activities, and testing the limited objectives of these games proved that students had learned the skills within the context of the games. If they were to apply these same skills to actual assignments, they would have to have a librarian at their elbow insisting, "Be sure to use *Children's Magazine Guide*." In other words, being taught how to use an index did not mean that the child would have any idea when to use it. After analyzing the problem, I knew that the research process would have to be understood to be taught. The pieces that the classroom teachers and I spent time teaching would need to be integrated within the research process.

Although I worried that I would not be able to get the students for sustained periods to do such intensive teaching, two factors made that an unnecessary worry. First, teachers were excited when the process was demonstrated to them. They were willing to work with me both on scheduling and reinforcing. Today, many of them teach the process themselves. Secondly, many of the skills that I had spent long periods teaching take minutes when taught within the framework of a process.

Although similar processes can be found in many study guides, and the methods for teaching the steps were borrowed from many of the best teachers and the literature, the integration of the steps and methods may be new. The idea of teaching research skills to primary age children may surprise many. But if they are old enough to be assigned reports, are they too young to learn a sound research process? Teaching process rather than individual skills is an old concept revisited.

It has been my goal in designing this process to engage and involve the students' enthusiasm; begin each skill with the concrete; model each step; and ultimately move from the concrete, i.e., finding a specific fact in a specific source, to

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higher levels of thinking (application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation).

These are the steps I follow:

**Step 1: I choose my topic.**

The researcher must know how to pronounce and spell his/her topic. This step does not appear as an isolated step in most guides but is used with young students because many times librarians are asked to help find information about "that explorer—you know—the one whose name starts with an 'M'."

**Step 2: I find out about my topic.**

No writing is allowed at this step. Read, view or listen to get a general understanding of the topic.

**Step 3: I focus my topic.**

Teach children to brainstorm. Remember that after step 2, students will have some terminology and ideas. As ideas are suggested, ask, "Does this relate to any other idea already on the chart (overhead, blackboard)." Begin grouping ideas; this process is often called webbing. If the brainstorming goes well, there should be too many subtopics for young students to tackle individually. Allow selection and organization as is taught in the language book.

**Step 4: I make a list of useful sources.**

Children learn that librarians, school and public, help with this step. Here I teach in context the tools that will be useful for this report. With teacher/librarian acting as a team, this could be the step taught by the librarian with the rest of the process being taught by the classroom teacher.

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**Step 5: I take notes.**

Children can be taught to take notes on a sheet of notebook paper or chart paper. Their notes will be simple at first. The advantages of this system are that children must classify information as they record, they must condense (you'll

need to model condensing), and they must compare the ideas from one source with at least two others.

The subtopics for the outline developed in step 3 are listed on the right hand side of the paper, the bibliography along the bottom.

Topic

Subtopic I			
Subtopic II			
Subtopic III			
Bibliography	source 1	source 2	source 3

**Step 6: I produce a project.**

Writing is always one component of this step since we want children to learn to write, and we believe that writing is an important tool for organizing what we know. Donald Graves' *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* is our authority for helping children master the writing process. We believe that writing helps the child understand the relationships and contradictions of the information gathered from different sources. Student writing can be used in various ways: filmstrips can be produced, plays, wax museums or other enactments can be performed and video taped; oral reports in the television news format can be created.

**Step 7: I produce a bibliography of sources used.**

Depending on the ages and abilities of the children, this can be basic author/title information or full bibliographic form.

This process can be taught to small groups such as reading groups. A classroom teacher will enthusiastically share one reading group with you while s/he teaches another. On the other hand an entire social studies or science class can be taught the process. When working with a large group, bring the entire class together to cover steps 1-3. Divide into small groups (work stations can be set up ahead of time with a suggested list of useful sources, step 4, at each station). Spread the small groups around the media center. The librarian and classroom teacher act as a team, moving from group to group, clearing up problems, teaching the children how to use each source, and modeling notetaking.

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Reach out to all classes. Think of ways to adapt the process to special education classes. What skills will these students need? How can you best teach to their abilities? Can they do a group research process on a large chart with the teacher or librarian acting as scribe while the students struggle with the important stuff—the ideas?

As you read through the research process, did you think of changes, adjustments, you would make? Super! You are investing in it; it is yours to

employ. No method works for us unless it excites us. If this method is used as a pedagogical club, it will have no chance of exciting young learners to become lifelong investigators. Enjoy the process, share it with staff and children; they will take it away from you.

#### Reference

Donald Graves, *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann Educational Books, 1982).



# stand up for libraries

NORTH CAROLINA LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

## Gaylord Tips: Microcomputer Maintenance

Supplied by Gaylord Bros. Inc., Trusted Source for Library Innovation

The following list of **dos** and **don'ts** will help to ensure the smooth operation of your library's microcomputers.

**DO** prevent the use of food or drink near computers. Accidents do happen, and a simple spill could result in a costly short-circuit.

**DO** guard against dust. Invest in dust covers, and vacuum-clean printers, keyboards and disk drives once a week. Dust will gradually slow your computers, and foul their electrical contacts.

**DO** take extra care with your disk drives. Disk drive cleaning kits can add up to five years to the life of a disk drive, and protect you from costly repair bills and lost data.

**DO** inspect your floppy disks regularly. Examine them through the half-inch slot in their protective covers. If you see streaks, specks, or other signs of dirt or wear, copy the data onto a new disk and discard the old one.

**DO** clean and oil your printer's metal tracks, on which the print heads slide back and forth. Wipe with a paper towel sprayed with contact cleaner, then apply a light lubricant such as sewing machine or jeweler's oil.

**DON'T** pull on computer wires; always hold them by the plastic or metal connectors on their ends. Keep the metal contacts clean with contact cleaner or a "Tex Wipe."

**DON'T** plug and unplug printers, modems and other accessories more than once a week. Invest instead in computer switching equipment that will allow two or more users to share the same equipment with a flip of a switch. This saves on cord wear-and-tear and eventual repair bills.

**DON'T** twist floppy disks or grab them by the middle. Twisting them inside their protective enclosures causes surface scratches that can damage disk drive read/write heads and destroy data. Hold them gently by the corner to avoid disk wear.

**DON'T** allow your computers to overheat. Position them so their air vents aren't blocked. Also, if your computer did not come with a built-in fan and seems to generate substantial heat during use, check with your vendor to see if a fan can be added.

**DON'T** allow static electricity or power surges to damage your equipment. Antistatic sprays and table mats will prevent static from causing your computer's memory to go blank. Surge suppressors are available to protect software and hardware from power "spikes"—the most common cause of computer damage—caused by the on-off switching of nearby copiers, refrigeration or air-conditioning equipment.

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