Interview with Will Fowler



WKCD asked Will Fowler, the Program Director at the Build San Francisco Institute, to share his insights about creating an effective Student Research for Action Project. Fowler's co-creator is teacher Dave Rosenbaum. Rosenbaum and Fowler guided students through the process of investigative reporting and video production, while building their academic skills.

Trust the Process, Trust the Kids

My metaphor for this project is asking the kids to assemble a puzzle without giving them the box with the picture on it. In project-based learning that's what it's like—you don't know where it's going to go. The more control you give to kids, the more legs it's going to have and the more directions it may flow.

This is a great way to challenge your students, it frees you up as an educator in ways—the hardest thing that teachers have to learn about this is learning to let go. Trust the process, trust the kids. Learning to let go and say, "they can do it." I can provide the structure and all the organization, but the quality of the final product will be in their hands, and the direction that it takes, and the lessons they learn, all of that is going to be theirs.

The idea is that human beings construct their views of knowledge. No matter how you give them the information, even if you lecture to them, they're still just constructing, so you might as well aid that process along. Make it a conscious process, rather than expecting them to just absorb what you put out there. This is knowledge that will stay, not be forgotten two days after the SAT.

One of the big raps I always have on project-based learning is that teachers start by telling their kids we're going to do some real world learning here. But they don't follow through, because it's so hard to get kids out into the real world. So, a lot of projects are still kind of make-believey: "Pretend you're an economist." If you're a high school junior you don't want to pretend anything. I want to be, I'm ready to be. So let's start with, You're an economist, here's your job.

A Six-Step Process

There's a continuum, in project-based learning-there's the "throw them to the wolves" approach, where we want students to just go out and "do" a project. The opposite issue is too much control on the part of the teacher, so that the kids don't feel like they own it. It's important to find a middle ground.

We evolved a five or six step process that we could identify when we worked with kids: Inquiry, Research, Construction, Production, Presentation, Assessment. If you know where you are and what's going on in those stages, it stops looking like chaos.

Inquiry

Establish a baseline of learning. What do the kids know? You do this very quickly, in conversations or writing activities. Then you can identify a topic of inquiry.

Our topic came out of the overarching driving question that Dave wrote: Should market forces alone determine housing south of Market? Out of that came, we want to look at affordable housing south of Market, and then out of that, what are they doing about that, and out of that came why are they doing this? Who is it going to affect? That's a process of inquiry. You are taking what you know and what you want to know, and you start asking questions. At that stage of the game it's all about questions.

Research

It is important to choose a subject area that the teacher already has knowledge of, and can marshal resources, contacts, and passions around.

Our research method is to use the Internet as a digital field trip, which the teacher has mapped out ahead of time. Digital field trips are very much like real field trips. No one in their right mind would take a busload of high school students down to Union Square, open the door and say, "Go out there and find something and come back in two hours!" Cause they will! But teachers are doing this with the Internet all the time: Go out and look stuff up! Kids at this stage of the game are not highly knowledgeable about the way the world works, so they don't know where to look. Everything is Google. We should not instruct a student to research a subject on the Internet, without mapping out their sites and stops ahead of time.

Decide what kind of knowledge you want to get from books and the Internet; then decide what kind of knowledge you want to get from human beings.

Teachers who have done their Master's Degree and have done a heavy research project themselves recently are probably better off in this process than the teachers that just came through an undergraduate credential program. If you haven't done really in depth research, I think, you underestimate how hard that is. You have to read five articles to get one paragraph of information. The students will need help with research, without a doubt.

Construction

The next stage in project-based learning is called Construction. And construction is construction of knowledge. So what do we know now, now that we've done our research? What do we know? This is a recursive, spiraling process-you have to go back and do more research and more inquiry and keep going, but at the construction stage they start learning how this is all going to go together.

Instead of doing formal storyboards, we did PowerPoints. which became our story. PowerPoints are a great way to get into your video project. We videotaped each of the speakers who came to discuss the issues involved in the Rincon Hill Development Project, and our question-and-answer sessions. A different student did a PowerPoint, where the edited the video of each speaker. That became the backbone of the video as a whole.

The beautiful thing about the digital world is that cutting and pasting video is just like cutting and pasting words. If you can run a word processing program and have any kind of visual skills at all, you can start editing video.

By doing the storyboards, the PowerPoints, we gathered a lot of information, we constructed what we knew, we figured out what we needed to know, and then we were ready for the next to last phase, which is production.

Production

A project like this is all about organization. It's not the kind of organization from the old days in teaching, where you had the five step lesson plan. You have to know who's working on what; you have to be, in essence, the manager of a media company. It's more the job of a producer than a director.

Our production method, and our curriculum method, is to work in Modules. Like building blocks. We set the project, and the video, up in individual blocks each of which could be an endpoint. If we get three blocks done we have that much of a story. If you can go to nine or twelve modules then they've learned even more; everything after that is just gold and extra on top of it.

Presentation

You just keep coming back to, do you want this to be something you're proud of, we're going to show this to a professional audience...you're going to be standing in front of the planning commission or experts from the planning department, and they're going to ask you all kinds of questions. You're going to have to have it together.

We brought experts from the field in at every stage of the game to talk to students, and they learned from that about how to present an idea, defend it, and stay polite if you have differences of opinion. We are going to screen this video in as many places as we can, and make it available to the public.

Assessment

You have to assess all along the way. It's like a production house or a design firm model: there are deliverables, at every stage of the game. The kids have to know that. You have deadlines and you have to meet the deadline. We have a rubric for each step of the game. We have a presentation rubric, and we sat down with the PowerPoints, and the kids use the rubric to rate their own programs.

For us, it's a holistic kind of grade. Who was the kid when they started, who is the kid now? Was she able to do this beforehand? Can we see growth in her ability to analyze and to think and to put pieces of the puzzle together? There's a whole level of professionalism in is the video well shot? Is it well lit? What did we learn? How does it relate to our idea of curriculum and standards?

In June, voila! They seem to all of a sudden blossom and know a great deal.

Integrating Academic Skills

We work with every student as an individual. In school-these are generalizations—frequently you do your paper the night before and you hand it in, you get a grade and you're happy or you're sad and you move on. There's no one saying, "This isn't up to my standards, I want you to do this again so it's better." The teacher doesn't feel they have time—I've gotta move on, I'm teaching history and we just did our paper on WWI, for God's sakes, I've got 6 weeks to get through Vietnam, I'll never make it! I can't have them do it again! But here we intervene, we have to. We take the time we need to make each piece right. We have to, because otherwise we would not have a meaningful product at the end.

We also integrate a lot of writing into this, because of the scripts. Many drafts. Dave and I were talking about that the other day and he was saying it was a frustrating day, I just couldn't get one of the students to produce what we need here. I said I know, it's like being a piano teacher, and you can play the piece and knock it right out, and the student just can't. You have to sit there and hope that they will find it within themselves to get those notes out of the piano. It's the same time. They have to call language to mind that they have never expressed before, and that's part of the process.

We do it again and again until it's right, and then we move on. We teach them reading and reading aloud skills, so they can narrate their PowerPoints. Math skill building is done in a real-life way. "How much money do you have to make an hour to afford $1600 a month, the median rent in San Francisco? It was a lot, almost $50 an hour. They were astonished to find that out. We went to the Department of Labor, and they have a breakdown of how much you should spend as a percentage of your income. This is some really basic math, so it was a great opportunity.

Incorporating Mentorship

We have kids in construction companies, architecture firms, port of San Francisco, some engineering houses, seismic engineering, the History Center...

You take this kid from the Outer Mission and he's got his stuff on—his jacket, his baggy pants, his big Air Jordan shoes, whatever he needs, and he's feeling pretty cool. We walk into the lobby of that building and we get on the elevator and all of a sudden he's checking, are my shoes tied, how do I look? They grow about two inches just in that elevator ride! It doesn't discourage who they are, they just realize for the first time that the rest of this world is maybe open to them. And that they could maybe be part of it. This is a big thing for kids.

We see this great growth in the kids in their maturity and their ability to talk to adults. Most high school kids talk to two or three adults—their mom, their dad, and their teachers, and that's all. Kids go in to C and B Engineers and see the buildings that they are studying about on the walls. They hear seismic engineers come in and talk to them and pulling the samples...all of the stuff is intersecting for them. They get a chance to see that what they're working on is where the professionals are as well, and so there's no doubt in their mind that this is a real world project.

The mentorships become more interesting than just, We need you to file this stuff. In an internship the intern is considered to be a worker. Here our kids are learners first, and workers second. They're there to find out everything they can about how the company works. Teachers have to work with the mentors and help them understand high school kids. This is a radical idea. Most interns are college seniors. So, a mentorship is not an internship. They're going to be kind of big brother, big sister, to a certain extent, for some of these kids.

Accommodating a Range of Student Skills

One of the nice things about video is that it is made by many hands, and it takes many different kinds of skills. You need camera people, you need editors, you need script writers, you need talent, people who can stand up. You need somebody to hold the lights and somebody to keep the clipboard. There's a range of skills that are required for the thing to come together. So in that way, a video project is almost perfect for dealing with a range of kids, and that allows us to help accommodate them.

If a kid with lower level writing skills says, "I want to help write the script," then you say yes, that would be good, you help write the script. Then that gives you a chance to take the student's writing and say OK here's what you need to do to polish this, to bring it along. You can really teach them some writing skills.

As an educator, I'm very thrilled that we have a video, but I really don't care if it gets done or not. What I'm looking at is we had eight or nine of the most influential people in SF talk to our kids on a weekly basis. We took kids out and showed them neighborhoods they'd never seen before. We introduced kids to their city in a way they didn't understand—they know the process of development, they know what the legal process is, they know all this stuff they didn't know before. And they made a video! And these kids have truly had a real-world experience. They want to show their video to as many people as they can. They want to have an impact on the community.