

# **STUDENTS BECOMING EXPERTS!**

## **by Susan Kovalik**

An aspect of the ITI Model that has been around since the early 1980's is the student yearlong research project. In this time of so many structured and scripted programs, it is ever more critical that students have a chance to have fun and realize they can be in charge of some aspect of their learning. It will be exciting and informational and may even have future career implications for them.

This process is not a formal research project but an opportunity to see how to follow an information path over a period of time. In addition to exciting information, they finish off their project with a table of contents, a glossary, and a bibliography. In essence they have created a non-fiction book that has a purpose for them.

Their choice of topics comes from the yearlong theme. There is a dual advantage to this strategy: one, as the class comes to a topic or component in the course of the year, you know there is a student who has been gathering specific data relevant to the study to contribute. Two, by having them choose from the theme you are bypassing 'topics of mayhem and murder'.

**SUPPLIES:** Every child needs a two-inch, three-ring binder to house all their articles, graphics, letters sent and received, and other written data. In addition, a supply of plastic sleeves/sheet protectors will be necessary to hold the information to fit into the binder. When reading articles, the goal is to identify key points, information they feel is very important, and then yellow highlight those key points, transfer the information to a Post-It Note and attach it to the article. This allows them to look back and see what they found important in the beginning of the research and how that changes as they learn more.

The reason for the binder is to document the information gathering process and begin to see the necessity to organize it over a period of time, actually months. Each article, email, or piece of information should be dated so they see the progression of their research.

**RESOURCES, WRITTEN:** newspaper, magazines, books, dictionaries, encyclopedias, almanac, atlases, field guides, biographies, telephone books, and the internet

**RESOURCES, VISUAL:** photographs, illustrations, graphs, maps, diagrams, movie clips

**RESOURCE PEOPLE:** Find people who are already experts and write a letter requesting specific information. Send a letter with specific questions and ask if they would videotape their answers, having a parent or relative videotape information they may have. Have at least five resource people.

**THE PROCESS:** Introduce the options available on the yearlong theme, and yes, two students can take the same topic, and young children do select animals, or families or transportation vehicles and their binder can be a bevy of pictures – organized of course. The student's name can be placed on the yearlong theme wall under the topic he/she chose. Students will run across information for another student and add to their collection. This is a great form of collaboration.

**YOU MUST SET ASIDE 30 minutes a week to do the initial work using a procedure for collecting, reading, documenting, and placing the materials into the binder. In addition to the 30**

minutes, the research project can be 'what they do when they are finished with their assignments'.

The goal for reading the article and underlining key points is to direct them in how to read for factual information. They select what is interesting to them! Underline it, transfer to a Post-It Note, put the Post-It Note on the article, and slip the article into the plastic sleeve. It is in this process that they begin their glossary. The page with the glossary definitions should include the word and which article it came from.

After a month of collecting data, it becomes very clear that they must find a way to organize it. This organization plan literally becomes their table of contents.

As the students use books and articles, they can begin their bibliography, indicating the name of the book or article, the pages the information was taken from and the date of publication.

When selecting someone to interview, the student must have enough knowledge to ask meaningful questions. Interview questions should be written ONLY after the student has done initial research on the topic. Remember, they are writing to experts. The proper form for writing a letter and the correct response when thanking someone for returning the information should be practiced.

**PROGRESS CHECK-IN:** At least twice a month, have each student share one new thing he/she has learned since the last time the group shared; this way they are moving forward and sharing at the same time. If they are not making progress, this would be a great coaching opportunity for an older student or an aide.

**PRESENTATION:** The object of the project is to have fun and learn something THEY want to learn. The benefit to the class is that as you reach that 'topic' in the yearlong theme; you now have an expert to add to the direct instruction. They can do a bulletin board, a display in the front of the room, put together a PowerPoint presentation, or in any other appropriate way demonstrate their newfound knowledge. In some cases they will not be well into the project because their topic is first on your board. Share what they have now, and later let them share again.

They can also share with other classes, put a display in the library, present at a board meeting or you can orchestrate an afternoon/evening with all your class experts in the cafeteria where the projects are on display and the students can share what they have learned. This is a great motivator for next year's class.

Above all this should be FUN, ENJOYABLE, AND SOMETHING TO TAKE HOME AT THE END OF THE YEAR to mark their year with you.

Have Fun!