

The English/journalism connection

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The idea is simple but exceptionally satisfying: a research project that encourages senior English students to learn about where they live.

We've called it the Historic Landmarks project because it started with ... *ah* ... historic landmarks. It has broadened in scope, however, and students may choose any sites close to home which tourists can visit. The topics, all within the parameters of that single theme, have been varied: Crown Hill Cemetery, the *USS Indianapolis* memorial, Monument Circle, the Children's Museum, Conner Prairie,

The idea of the research project was not mine; I inherited it from a previous English 12 teacher. Her assignment: a research paper about an Indiana Historic Landmark. My amended assignment: a two-page magazine spread about an Indiana site open to tourists – along the lines of a travel article – using InDesign.

It's a natural blend of English and journalism. The project has produced not only interest in specific sites but also family conversations, visits to those sites and a new way to present the information in an exceptionally reader-friendly format.

"I learned a lot of interesting things about a city that I thought was boring," said LC's Brad Steinius. "I don't get to go downtown a lot so the field trip was awesome. Doing all the research, interviewing, visiting the site, and making the magazine spread was a really cool experience."

Taylor Hicks said, “I got the chance to go to the Indiana War Memorial and see my late grandpa’s name on a U.S. Army plaque. I was also able to do this with my father, who I rarely get to see.”

Tyler Fischl said he liked the project “because you have to get out and explore, no matter what your situation is. My family got involved and for the first time ever we all had fun exploring and gathering information. I enjoyed my time with my family, and I enjoyed getting a good grade on my paper.”

Becky Laffin said she typically stresses over research papers “but this one was easier because it was more of a story.” And when she took the finished project home, her mother was so excited that she framed it.

Indiana Landmarks was so impressed with the project that it presented LC with its coveted Sandi Servaas Memorial Award.

It’s an assignment that begins, perhaps a bit on the sly, on Day 1 of the school year. Previous years’ projects are displayed on the walls of my classroom, and they generally elicit a question or two from my new students. In bits and pieces throughout the first several weeks of school, I try to kindle a spark of interest in each student by adding a little more here and there.

- I gather brochures, post cards, magazine and newspaper articles about tourist sites and make them available to students who just want to browse.
- I present a slide show of photos from sites in Indiana, principally Indianapolis. I have quite a few; most photos are mine but I also have some from the sites themselves.
- I send a letter home to parents to explain the assignment and suggest they participate in the research with their students.

- Early on, students spend a portion of one class in the computer lab, looking through the website of the Indianapolis Convention and Visitors Association for site ideas.
- We take a three-hour field trip with a step-on guide from Indiana Landmarks. The school bus drives a route, planned by Landmarks, which has included Monument Circle, Indiana War Memorial, Indiana Avenue, Madam Walker Theatre, *USS Indianapolis* Memorial, Children's Museum, Indianapolis Museum of Art, Crown Hill Cemetery. We drive by most of the sites but get off at two – usually Crown Hill Cemetery and the *USS Indianapolis* Memorial. The assignment while on the bus: write accurate quotes from the tour guide. Students hand the assignment to me as they get off the bus.
- I invite parents to join us on the field trip.
- I make an audio tape of the tour and have it available for students so they can hear again what the guide had to say. I also make the tape available to students who missed the field trip.
- Each student is to visit his chosen site and to have a picture of himself taken there as proof of his visit. This photo is not to be included in the magazine spread.
- Each student is to create a separate bibliography with at least three sources. At least one of the sources is to be a personal interview. I tell them the easiest and often the best way to gather information is through a guided tour.
- Each paper is to include direct quotes – from a tour guide, site administrator, site visitor, family member who has a tie to the site,
- Each paper is to be 700-850 words in length with an anecdotal lead.
- Each paper is to be turned in to www.turnitin.com.

- Classroom work is done in bits and pieces, seldom with an entire block devoted to work on it. Important exception: Everyone is in the computer lab together when I teach them the basics of InDesign. They also get detailed InDesign directions as well as a style guide for the “magazine.” Examples: Everyone uses 10-point Times or Times New Roman, four columns on each page, at least three photos (one dominant). They may take their own photos, get photos from the site’s public relations office, or use photos which I provide. They may not copy and paste photos from the internet. That’s theft.
- Work is graded piecemeal as we proceed through the assignment; i.e., separate grades/point values for field trip quotes, interview notes, bibliography, first 100 words of the paper,
- We haven’t made a real magazine, but we do post the magazine spreads in the school’s English hallway.

This coming year, I plan to add another element to the assignment: a 15-to-30-second video ad encouraging the viewer to visit the site, using Windows Movie Maker.

I would be happy to send a CD of photos, directions and examples of finished projects to teachers. Just email me: elizabethgranger@msdlt.k12.in.us. Much of this will eventually be on my school website.