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Meg Donhauser

Heather Hersey

Cathy Stutzman

Marci Zane

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Meg Donhauser, Heather Hersey, Cathy Stutzman and Marci Zane

"I've Learned All This . . . So What?"

Expose a three-year old to something new, and she will ask a million existential questions about the most mundane of things. Young children take a natural, active role in making meaning of the world around them, never afraid to take a path of inquiry to its nth degree. Take that same student at age 15, and with a much different tone, she may ask, "Why are we learning this?" Ah, the dreaded question. At its root, the question demonstrates a disconnect between her self and the content or skills that she's learning in school. If she does not see an opportunity to bring her own unique perspective and experiences into the content of the course, it remains irrelevant to the "real world" and becomes just another box to check on the way to graduation.

We want our students to wonder, to ask questions, to search for answers, and ultimately discover something about themselves and their environment. Essentially, we want them to connect with their three-year-old selves. This becomes increasingly difficult in contemporary high school English classrooms where teachers feel the pressures of test preparation and SGO's, and it seems that the more education a student receives, the further removed she is from her natural sense of curiosity.

Using Inquiry to Drive Meaningful Learning

It is this challenge that is driving some of the English classes at Hunterdon Central Regional High School in Flemington, NJ to implement the Inquiry Learning Plan¹, an organizational tool for students to author their own learning. Students design their own learning experiences -- tackling standards that meet their individual learning needs, developing unique essential questions, and studying individually chosen texts. Students complete rounds of activities, and since they are actively engaging in inquiry, they complete reflections throughout the course of the unit. Because their learning is so personalized, the students in these classes arrive in very different places by the end of each unit, even if they begin

with the same text. As a result, they must have the freedom to capture and share that learning in a way that is meaningful to them.

The last step of the Inquiry Learning Plan is the "So What?", a final assessment that not only reflects what the students take away, but also extends to an authentic audience with an actual product or "artifact" of their learning as we frequently call it. Students look to the overarching themes, skills, and discoveries of the unit to determine the essential lesson they've learned and how they want to share it.

Preparing for the "So What?": The Importance of Reflections

In order to prepare students for thinking about and creating their "So What?", we complete reflections over the course of the unit to consider the deeper meanings and larger implications of their essential questions. When students reflect, they synthesize information from their texts in order to answer their questions; they also connect their learning to historical and social contexts and to their personal experience. These reflections, which happen three times over the course of the unit, allow students to think about the value that their learning holds. They often connect something about themselves to the content they are studying, and those aha moments eventually become starting points for the "So What?"

As part of his study of Modern and Postmodern texts, one student in an American Literature class reflected after a group discussion about Jackson Pollock's paintings:

At first look [we] both agreed that the paintings were very similar but [he] had the brilliant idea of looking at brush strokes. He pointed out that in "Number 5" the lines look more squiggly and smooth while in "Convergence" the paint seemed to be more jagged, showing that the author was more angered. When I looked at the paintings I did not really pay attention to the brush strokes but I considered the new changes coming along in society and took into consideration that change can cause chaos therefore the artist who painted these pieces was caught

¹ For more information on the Inquiry Learning Plan, visit letgotolearn.com

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up in the chaos and he needed to show how back and forth everything was. To me the lines look like they have no control and I think that basically sums up chaos.

Based on his peer discussion, the student saw characteristics that he had not previously considered, examining the “brush strokes” that authors use to develop themes in a text and explaining how those choices are influenced by environment. However, and perhaps more importantly, he realized just how much his own environment shaped his thinking. His groupmate challenged him to think in a new way, and as a result he discovered something new about craft and purpose. The way he constructed meaning from new texts changed from that point forward. When he was ready to create a final product for the unit, he went back to those reflections and decided to write his own poem about the influence his father had on his life. He made very unique and personal stylistic moves throughout the poem to demonstrate how his values were shaped by his father. Reflections throughout the learning process are essential to the eventual creation of the “So What?” Without them, students do not have the depth of content or skills to understand what they learned much less create a final artifact to demonstrate it.

Creating the “So What?": Moving Beyond the Classroom

Both the reflections and the “So What?” artifact go beyond an account of what students learned by asking them to think about why it matters—not only to them and their classmates but also to their school, community, and beyond. For example, in Meg’s Critical Issues in Literature course, students read dystopian novels such as *Unwind* and *Uglies* while pursuing the essential question, “Why must we solve the problems of our generation?” Then they researched a contemporary issue in order to create an artifact that would convince their peers to care about the issue and the role it might play in our dystopian future.

One group wanted to answer the guiding question, “What role does society play in victim blaming?” As group members Rachel and Charlie completed their research, which included a survey for students and an interview with a detective, they were strongly moved by two stories they

discovered: (1) the response to the guilty verdict of the Steubenville, Ohio rape case; and (2) the work of Project-Unbreakable.org, whose mission “is to increase awareness of the issues surrounding sexual assault and encourage the act of healing through art.” Combining their very strong emotional responses with the knowledge they had gained researching rape culture and victim blaming in media, they chose to create a Tumblr that could easily be shared with the teen community. On their page, they posted links to articles and statistics to educate their audience; they also reposted images from Project Unbreakable and videos from other Tumblrs in order to shock and inspire their readers. Finally, using WeVideo.com, Charlie created his own video, that contrasted Robin Thicke’s “Blurred Lines” with advertisements, news articles, and quotes whose sources ranged from politicians to assault victims. When this project was shared with their peers, it was obvious that the pair was successful in convincing their audience that this topic needed to be addressed. Students were eager to learn more and to share what they had experienced.

These students were able to find success because they moved beyond the traditional requirements of a research assignment. It wasn’t a simple matter of looking up statistics in a database to prove what they already thought they knew. They were stopping along the way to reflect on what knowledge they had and what they still needed to know. Because they were interacting with a detective who had worked on rape cases, they were able to develop unique insights into their topic. When told that there were dozens more female rape victims than male, Rachel and Charlie began to wonder if this was because male victims were truly fewer in number or if they were more reluctant to come forward. The pair created new questions which led to a more inclusive final product; they were sure to explore the role of gender in victim blaming. The ILP allowed them to follow a line of inquiry until they found satisfaction. And because there wasn’t a set of instructions as to what they had to produce, they were able to think about the best way to reach their audience. They were learning how to persuade their readers and viewers using the information that they had gathered, a necessary skill no matter the argument. Ideally, students will choose an authentic audience to share their work

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with; for these students, the perfect audience was their peers in school--teens similar to those in the Steubenville story. Who better to effect change for a generation than those who represent it?

Standards in the "So What?"

Final artifacts don't always relate to the themes found in essential questions; a student's grandest take-away might relate to a skill-based standard instead. One sophomore felt that his biggest accomplishment was finally understanding how to incorporate and analyze a quote in his writing. For him, this was monumental, and he wished he could go back to his middle school self and explain what to do in simpler terms. Though he couldn't go back to help his younger self, he chose instead to help others. For his "So What?", he created a presentation on how to break down a quote and shared it with his middle school English teacher, so that she could use it as a resource with her students.

Over the past few years, we have seen a tremendous range of final artifacts. To better illustrate the variety and possibility found in this type of assessment, following is a list of other "So What?" examples and an indication of the focus of each one:

- A letter to the superintendent about school policy changes after a student learned how to write a strong argument by considering the opposing perspective and the audience's concerns. (focus on a writing skill)
- A painting demonstration following the realization that emotion impacts the way that artists (including authors) craft a piece of art. Student walked his audience through his process as he painted. (focus on a reading skill)
- A musical score that demonstrated the clash and similarities between two main characters in a play. (focus on content)
- A speech about a setting's impact on protagonists and how that shifted from the Romantic to the Realist era. (focus on speaking skills, reading skills, and content)

Overcoming Obstacles

Over the last three years of implementing the ILP, we've found the "So What?" section to be the most challenging—for the students and for

us. By synthesizing, analyzing, and creating throughout the process leading up to and during the "So What?," students are working on some really challenging skills. It takes time for students to develop an idea for an artifact and identify an audience, which is why students must first complete a rationale, which outlines the plan for their artifact, drawing on their prior reflections to explain what was learned and what needs to be shared, as well as how and with whom. By completing this rationale, the teacher can step in to ask questions and guide the student towards a satisfying final product.

As Einstein said, "the formulation of the problem is often more essential than the solution," which we need to remember when a brilliant idea falls flat or we don't have the resources to support it. Students may try an experimental art piece that simply does not match their original intentions. During his British Romanticism unit, Jacob, a senior, explored the nature of man, concluding that there were many sides to each of us, including the animal and the divine. For his final artifact, Jacob explained that he would use an artist's model to represent an everyman; his intention was to create various masks to place on the model as a representation of the different aspects of man's nature. His rationale was excellent, using specific references to each of his texts to explain how his understanding of humanity developed over the course of the unit. Unfortunately, the final execution did not live up to his expectations; his materials and skills were unable to relay the depth of his understanding. In these instances, it's important to remember a student's process and rationale during our assessment conversation. Furthermore, if you look at the rubric below, there is no expectation for a perfect product. It focuses on synthesis, insightfulness, and connections. This is crucial to support a student's desire to take risks and experiment with new ideas. The process they go through in developing and creating the "So What?" needs to be honored and assessed on its own merit.

Sometimes we run out of time, so students may only have the opportunity to complete the rationale, rather than the artifact. All teachers are painfully aware of the time constraints placed on us by course deadlines, testing, and sometimes even fun things, like winter break! But we are also well aware of how crucial allowing

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opportunities for students to create something meaningful can be. Having a “So What?” at the end of each unit is ideal; however, it can still be valuable as a way to sum up the end of the course. When done in this manner, students are able to look back over a whole course’s accomplishments, which still lends itself to incredible insights not only about content but also about their learning experience in general. At the end of an eighteen-week British Literature course, one student wrote in his rationale, “Up until I started the inquiry process, I saw learning as purely academic, with no relative meaning to my own life, but this [“So What?”] will show how wrong I was and the positive outcome I got out of the class. I wish...to prove that students are amazing individuals and not just grades on a sheet.” This student’s take away for the course was a realization that there were other ways to approach school and that he was in control of how he learned. Even though the class wasn’t able to complete a “So What?” for each unit, the use of it as a culminating event remains effective.

Assessing the “So What?”

Since students are completing products unique to their learning, there is a special challenge when it comes to assessing the final artifact. Obviously, students need to demonstrate understanding of texts and information, which can be explained in the rationale. Students must refer to their past work in order to explain how they developed their insights. There should also be an explanation as to how the skills of the unit have impacted their artifact. If students focused on the argument standards, like Charlie and Rachel, then there needs to be elements of claim and counterclaim, evidence, and organizational strategies that support the main idea. But it’s possible that not all students will be pursuing the same mode of writing or speaking, or that their topics are related to in any way to their peers.

In order to fairly assess all students without having to make individual rubrics, we created a generic rubric that incorporates standards from the Core Curriculum State Standards, IRA’s and NCTE’s Standards for the English Language Arts, and the American Association of School Librarians’ Standards for the 21st-Century Learner. This rubric allows us to look at skills like communication, use of technology, and synthesis. It also provides an

opportunity for students to follow through on their objectives from the rationale; the format, style, and delivery of the product is completely open as long as it meets the needs of their authentic audience and conveys students’ learning.

The “So What?” is one of only a few summative grades we give during the course of a unit with the ILP. With many opportunities for formative feedback and self-assessment in the earlier rounds of activities, students gain an increasing confidence in their content and skill acquisition. When it comes time to create something out of everything they’ve learned, they are able to showcase their best work for the unit. In that case, the “So What?” grade accurately reflects their abilities. Furthermore, it serves as an artifact for students so they can clearly see their learning and how it applies to the larger world.

Preparation for Citizenship and College

In 2006, senior executives and human resource officials participated in an in-depth survey on workforce readiness conducted by The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and the Society for Human Resource Management. The report, *Are They Really Ready to Work? Employers’ Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century Workforce*, gave insight to the skill sets new employees would need to exhibit in order to be successful in today’s workplaces. Over 70 percent of employers estimated that creativity and innovation would “increase in importance” for future employees (Casner-Lotto and Barrington). These applied skills were among the top five that they hoped to see in college graduates.

Educator and author Tony Wagner stresses the importance of such survival skills for success not only in today’s workplace but also in our daily lives. He states that “what you know matters far less than what you can do with what you know” (qtd. in Friedman). The “So What?” in this learning experience captures exactly that--what students can *do* with what they *know*. Wagner notes that “the capacity to innovate--the ability to solve problems creatively or bring new possibilities to life” are exactly the types of challenges and opportunities our students need in the classroom so that they can learn to transfer those experiences out of the classroom (qtd. in Friedman).

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The "So What?" addresses essential college and career readiness, as well as 21st-century survival skills. The opportunity to create and implement a means of assessment prepares students for the type of problem-solving, planning, and responsibility that will be necessary for the workforce and life-long, independent learning beyond high school. For instance, one student reflected that the inquiry structure that led to the "So What?" helped prepare her for college:

I have always been in a class where teachers told me what I had to do and when. So this class sort of made me grow up. I was given deadlines for a product, but I needed to do everything on my own. I feel like this class stressed responsibility in an individual which I feel will definitely help me next, when I am a college freshman and really on my own. The responsibility for my own work will definitely transfer out of this class and follow me in everyday tasks whether it is for school, a job, or just in interpersonal affairs. This process of gaining responsibility was the most important part of my journey. I don't care whether I could synthesize everything I read at the end of the class, but the journey where I persevered through distractions and setbacks really enforced my growing up through literature.

Three years after going through the inquiry process, another former student wrote to us about the value of sharing her work with her classmates for feedback and the benefits of sharing her ideas with authentic audiences by writing on a blog:

I had emotional stake in all my posts because I was given freedom to write about things I cared about. So the ideas I developed became part of me. I became more confident in my ideologies.... The energy of the classroom, in those moments, was so unique. By becoming teachers, if just for a moment, my classmates and I were forced to communicate, and to understand the nuances of teaching. It was liberating. It became easy to share thoughts with one another beyond class. This...created a

class which did not stop when the bell rang.

This student not only received valuable feedback from her peers, but she was also able to understand what she was thinking by sharing her work. She saw the value in her teacher letting go of content so that she could explore with her peers.

Our students are charged with the responsibility, the curiosity, and the perseverance to undertake this learning process. This is the core of critical thinking. This is the core of rigor. And we—the teachers and librarians—provide feedback, ask them questions, connect them with texts and information, and help mold their thinking and creativity towards the final "So What?". Our role is to help our students learn not just the content of the curriculum, but also how to navigate the landscape of learning and research, with all of its twists, turns, and bumps in the road. This is the spirit of adaptability, and such experiences help students build confidence and skill as independent thinkers.

We can't help but see the connections between our students' learning and the message Wagner articulates. Our students are unpacking language in standards to identify skills they need to address. They are choosing information sources responsibly and synthesizing these sources to address the divergent and convergent questions they are crafting. They are deciding which activities best allow them to practice and master the standards, and they are reflecting upon these activities, which ultimately leads to a final summative representation of their learning, the "So What?" When it comes to the "So What?" students are thinking beyond traditional types of projects they have completed in the past and channeling their creativity with guidance from their teachers, but with limits only they put on themselves. We are evolving our classrooms to prepare students for the ever-changing nature of our technology-driven, globally-connected world. We want them to have the work ethic and develop the self-direction, leadership, and collaboration skills that will make them successful in any future they choose for themselves.

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Works Cited

- Casner-Lotto, Jill, and Linda Barrington. "Are They Really Ready To Work? Employers' Perspectives On The Basic Knowledge And Applied Skills Of New Entrants To The 21st Century U.S. Workforce." *Partnership For 21st Century Skills* (2006): ERIC. Web. 14 Dec. 2013.
- Friedman, Thomas L. "Need a Job? Invent It." *New York Times*. The New York Times Company, 31 Mar. 2013. Web. 14 Dec. 2013.

| Defining Traits | Advanced Proficient | Proficient | Developing |
|---|---|--|---|
| Ideas <u>CCSS.ELA.CCRA.R.7</u> <u>AASL 3.1.1</u> <u>AASL.3.1.5</u> <u>IRA/NCTE 8</u> | <p>Presents student’s greatest takeaway from the unit and stems from synthesis of unit content/skills.</p> <p>Uses medium to provide insightful, original information while demonstrating deep knowledge of unit content/skills.</p> <p>Connects learning to community (local or global).</p> | <p>Presents student’s greatest takeaway from the unit and stems from synthesis of content/skills, but the connection may not be clear OR the synthesis lacks development.</p> <p>Uses medium to provide information that demonstrates comprehension of unit content/skills.</p> <p>Shows knowledge of community.</p> | <p>Presents student’s takeaway, but its origins are not clear OR synthesis is weak or missing.</p> <p>Uses medium to provide information that demonstrates limited or incorrect comprehension of content/skills.</p> <p>Does not connect learning to community.</p> |
| Organization <u>AASL 3.1.4</u> <u>CCSS.ELA.CCRA.W.4</u> OR <u>CCSS.ELA.CCRA.SL.4</u> | <p>Builds an insightful product through effective organization and development.</p> <p>Clarifies relationships among ideas and reasoning with sophisticated and appropriate transitions.</p> <p>Enhances topic and purpose with meaningful structure.</p> | <p>Uneven organization and development restrict insight.</p> <p>Inconsistent transitions cause gaps among ideas and reasoning.</p> <p>Predictable or hackneyed structure.</p> | <p>Lack of organization and development prohibits insight.</p> <p>Lack of transitions leads to unclear relationships among ideas and reasoning</p> <p>Structure lacks meaning.</p> |
| Conventions <u>AASL 1.1.3</u> | <p>Presents an error-free product.</p> <p>Respects copyright/intellectual property rights of original creators and producers when using and creating media.</p> | <p>Some errors.</p> <p>Credits original creators but incorrectly or inconsistently.</p> | <p>Numerous errors take away from product.</p> <p>Does not credit original creators.</p> |
| Audience and Purpose <u>CCSS.ELA.CCRA.SL.4</u> <u>CCSS.ELA.CCRA.SL.5</u> <u>IRA/NCTE 7</u> <u>AASL 3.1.3</u> | <p>Makes strategic use of the medium for an appropriate audience so that listeners or viewers can follow reasoning and purpose.</p> <p>Demonstrates awareness of audience’s knowledge and interests.</p> <p>Communicates with audience in a timely and professional manner.</p> | <p>Appropriate medium but some disconnect within its delivery OR some of the audience’s knowledge and interests are not addressed.</p> | <p>Disconnect between medium and audience OR unclear audience.</p> |

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IRA/NCTE Standards for the English Language Arts:

7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

AASL Standards for the 21st-Century Learner:

- 1.1.3: Respect copyright/intellectual property rights of creators and producers.
- 3.1.1: Conclude an inquiry-based research process by sharing new understandings and reflecting on learning.
- 3.1.3 Use writing and speaking skills to communicate new understandings effectively.
- 3.1.4 Use technology and other information tools to organize and display knowledge and understanding in ways that others can view, use, and assess.
- 3.1.5 Connect learning to community issues.

Common Core State Standards:

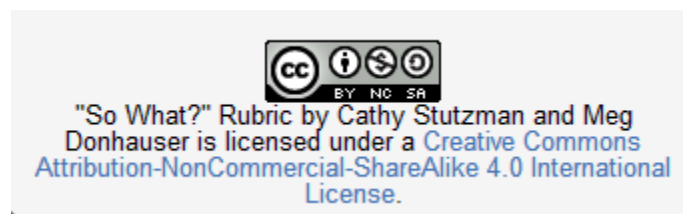
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.5 Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7 Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.¹

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.L.3 Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.



Meg Donhauser, Heather Hersey, Cathy Stutzman and Marci Zane blend the complementary practices of English teachers and teacher-librarians. With diverse backgrounds in inquiry, they make student choice and ownership the focus of their teaching practices. They have presented their work with inquiry and with the Inquiry Learning Plan at state and national conferences and were featured in publications including *Ed Leadership*. They also write about their experiences at <http://letgotolearn.com/>.