

Nurturing Changemakers With an ELA Project

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Student Voice

One way to help students master skills is to let them cultivate their own English language arts content to explore. Here's how.

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In those frightening first years as a young teacher, my content was precious to me. It seemed so important for students to understand who Piggy, Jack, and Ralph were; to dissect the relationships between Gatsby, Nick, and Daisy; to fall in love with their independent-reading characters. But the longer I taught, the more self-evident it became: Skills trump content. And to have students truly master skills, they need to buy into what you're asking them to do.

Instead of providing content curated by teachers and handed down to them, help students cultivate their *own* content for exploration. Increase buy-in further by providing ample choice in how students demonstrate mastery. Building off project-based learning (PBL) and Genius Hour projects, the following multigenre, multimedia project is one way to organize a student-driven, action-oriented unit that will nurture problem-solving and critical thinking skills.

Get them on board

The first step to student ownership and buy-in is to let them pick their topics. This, however, is frequently easier said than done. Without *some* guidance, most students will have no idea where to go. To avoid a lot of unproductive wheel spinning and a flurry of “I don’t know what to do,” complete a whole-group brainstorming process.

The World Café is a fun, interactive way to identify issues, topics, challenges, and problems that students see in their school, community, state, country, and/or world. Here are some possible questions to drive ideas:

- What frustrates you? Make a list for each of the following: At home, at school, in our community, in the world.
- What injustices do you see around you? What’s unfair? Again, at home, at school, in our community, in the world.
- What is preventing your generation from living “the American Dream”?
- What does our community need? What could you do to improve our community?

Dedicate a portion of two to three class periods to generating ideas; encourage students to keep adding to the lists. If you have multiple class periods, post all responses and give students time to do a gallery walk to read all the brainstorms.

Then guide students toward topics that

1. require research in order to understand the full nature of the problem;
2. have multiple possible solutions; and
3. allow students to design and propose—and possibly implement—a viable solution.

While students can work independently, small teams (two to four students) researching one problem will yield richer results. For students who fear relying on the work of others, explain that each group member will produce all of their own content.

Note: This is an opportunity for a meaningful cross-curricular project with social studies. There will be a team for each problem in each course: The ELA group can explore the social movement/arts-based solutions, while the social studies group looks at legal/legislative/civic solutions.

Initiate authentic research

Using a student planning document, teams work collaboratively to research their chosen topic in order to articulate

1. the *problem*,
2. the *causes* of the problem,
3. the *importance/impact* of the issue (*Why should people care about this?*), and
4. a possible authentic *solution* to the problem.

This will be more than just regurgitating the research of other people; the purpose of an authentic problem is to allow for authentic work. You provide mini-lessons and how-to sessions and practice to guide their work; then students conduct interviews with key players, read primary sources, and uncover all the whys behind their topic.

This is one way to break down the task, but myriad options exist: write three arguments to prove one thesis; outline multiple solutions to a problem, then gather votes for the best option; convey the past, present, and future of a topic; show the domino effect of first this, then that, then ultimately that; or any other breakdown that works logically for your subject/content.

Highlight Real-World Problems

Now for the fun. Rather than writing one long research paper, students produce at least one artifact for each aspect of the project (*the problem, the causes, the importance, the solution*) using each of the following genres: narrative, informative, persuasive, graphic. These *four* artifacts will each take a different format, including, but not limited to, blog/vlog, article/editorial, podcast, poster, meme, infographic, photo journal, advertisement, photo essay, skit, documentary, or other format (as suggested by the student and approved by the teacher).

So, Student One may explore the *problem* with an informative news article, explain the *causes* of the problem in a narrative podcast, emphasize the *importance* of the problem in an infographic, and propose a *solution* in a persuasive blog.

Each team member produces their own content, but the team needs to think strategically so that all artifacts fit together in a cohesive way. For example: To explore the *cause*, Student One makes a narrative podcast, Student Two writes an informative article, Student Three creates an infographic, and Student Four creates a photo essay. Together, they fully tell the story of the cause.

Each week, students complete the student planning document, outlining upcoming goals, and complete a weekly Flip post on those goals: one week reflecting as a team summarizing where the team is in completing those goals, and then the following week reflecting *solo*.

Throughout the process, some students are drafting, some are revising, and others are publishing content. Peer editing occurs throughout that cycle, along with teacher feedback. As the instructor, add in mini-lessons on human-centered design, tech how-to, citations, reflection, and any other skills that need support. The class can also read other content together, look at examples of modern changemakers, and practice other skills.

Celebrate THEIR solutions

Finally, students curate their research—including each individually produced multimedia artifact—for public consumption. This raises the bar for their work, provides an authentic audience, and connects the classwork to the community. While a website is an obvious way to organize the content, groups will select a format that fits both their topic and their strengths as a group. Possible formats include, but are not limited to, website, interactive gallery, QR code tour, HyperDoc road map.

Ideally, students will also share their problem, causes, impact, and proposed solution with people who could actually enact change. Present to the school board or city council; set up a meeting with a legislator; give a speech to the student body.

If the potential messy nature and unknown needs of PBL have your skin crawling, reduce the frustration by making a clear schedule of due dates as well as lists of tasks, both for you and for students. Most mini-lesson topics can be anticipated before students even pick research subjects, so you can plan and prep those. You can also outline a whole semester schedule: Dedicate two days per week to the research projects and the rest of the time to more traditional content you plan in advance.

While this overview is not exhaustive, I hope it will spark multiple ideas for embedding student-driven content in your classroom. Students need to develop authentic problem-solving skills; the classroom is the perfect place to practice and plant the seeds for future changemakers.