

How the Big6 Took Me from Lazy Language Arts Teacher to Motivated Media Specialist

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(This article is dedicated to my colleague, Cathlee Gallup, 6th grade teacher at East Hills Middle School, for her part in making the “Big6 Research Project” what it is today. Her creativity, teamwork, professionalism, commitment to education and friendship are invaluable.)

I have a confession to make. I love Big6, so I jump on any opportunity to incorporate it into learning experiences with students. Yet, what I’m about to describe was originally borne of typical end-of-the-school-year laziness. My previous district had some staffing changes due to budget cuts, so I found myself as a Media Specialist turned English teacher in a flash. Yet, despite the adjustment, I secretly felt this was a wonderful opportunity to work with my own class on the information literacy skills I could never seem to lure my colleagues into the library for. Although I only spent one year teaching Language Arts before returning to my work as a Media Specialist, my experiences during that time have formed the foundation for many wonderful collaborations thereafter.

But back to my confession. Yes, I had spring fever along with the students and at the end of a challenging year, I decided to launch a simple unit that would accomplish five things:

- 1) It would be done completely in class (I was weary of being the homework cop);
- 2) It would not involve any extensive papers to correct (let’s face it, English can be brutal when it comes to educators lugging papers home);
- 3) It would allow students who did not traditionally do well in Language Arts to meet with some success (and hopefully go away with at least one good grade before the year’s end);
- 4) It would be more student-centered than most projects, providing individuals an opportunity to study a topic of interest to them; and
- 5) It would expose students to the importance of effective research skills and help them begin to develop those skills for use again in the future.

As a result, what started as an idea from a Media Specialist in a pinch has over the years developed into an extensive research unit ripe for collaboration at any grade level with any teacher of any subject.

The Big6 Unit - The Basics

This unit is simply called “The Big6 Research Project.” This humble title belies the power of the unit - it has not only spread quickly through my middle school, but others in the district have had their interest piqued and a colleague and I have had the honor of presenting it to a neighboring district for use with several of their K-12 educators.

I feel the reason it has caught on so well and met with such positive reviews is due to the wonderful adaptability of the unit. Thanks to the flexibility of the Big6 research process, it has a little something for everyone and can be adjusted to suit any needs. I have had the pleasure of doing this unit at all

three grade levels in my building (6th-8th), as well as with the Deaf and Hearing Impaired and Special Education students. Yet, with a little tweaking it can be simplified or enhanced for use with lower elementary or high school students.

This unit can be done by an individual teacher or as a team-teaching opportunity. Although, as a Media Specialist, I secretly hope you track down your building “Media Maven” and suggest a collaboration, such as my colleagues and I have enjoyed. I have worked with many fellow educators on this project, each contributing their own expertise to the unit, but I would personally like to acknowledge the amazing contributions of 6th grade Language Arts teacher Cathlee Gallup at East Hills Middle School. Mrs. Gallup has provided invaluable information and advice throughout the process of streamlining a unit that began as a fledgling concept and has blossomed into a solid learning experience for all. Her adaptations to the original packet pages have greatly improved the execution and success of the Big6 Research Project.

In brief, the basic elements of the unit are as follows:

- 1) The students, Media Specialist, and teacher are commissioned to pick their own non-fiction topic of personal interest that they would like to research for an informative speech. Both can either research their topic in advance, or lead the students through the process just one step ahead of them. This obvious buy-in to the unit by the adults is one more way to inspire the students.
- 2) Each student receives a [BIG6 PACKET](#) (.pdf) containing an overview of Big6, pages for each of the 6 stages of the process, and auxiliary materials to support researching, making citations, speech-writing, etc. **PLEASE NOTE: Only the core pages are included in this packet. When my class does this unit, I also give them supplemental materials and tips on Internet searching, plagiarism, presentation tips, and so forth.**
- 3) As students make their way through the packet, the Media Specialist and teacher work together to introduce each stage of Big6, modeling the process for students so they are guided through the stages of doing effective research and aware of what is expected.
- 4) At the conclusion of their research, each student should be an “expert” on their topic and ready to give an informative speech to their classmates. If possible, it’s a powerful learning experience if the teacher and/or media specialist give a speech as well, evaluating themselves for the class using the rubric. This is a wonderful way to model proper public speaking and a great segue to class discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of a good speech.

The students return the completed packet to their teacher, containing the printouts, source lists, citations and other important information gathered during their journey through the Big6 process.

- 5) The teacher smiles, because all of the 5 points above have been met!

Tips for delivering the unit

Before beginning the unit, I think it is important to arouse the students’ curiosity and introduce the concept of information problem solving using Big6. One good way to start is with a simple exercise that gets students’ brains working and gets them moving around the room. First, I take a deck of index cards (enough so that each student gets one) and write one Big6 stage on each card. After a very brief explanation that Big6 is a model for doing research, I shuffle and hand each child a card. Students are challenged to find their classmates who have the other 5 steps that make up the Big6 process. The students must then stand in the order they think each would logically occur when engaging in research. Winners get a little prize.

Getting started is often the hardest part. Students who are not familiar with Task Definition (Big6, 1.0) may find the first exercise the most challenging. This is where the teacher can be especially useful in modeling good Big6 practices. Before the students dive into their projects, I like to use my own topic as an example and show students how I might take a broad subject like "Australia" or "Dentistry" and narrow it down. I can also show them how to broaden a topic that may be too specific. This can lead to some very productive discussion as students suggest possible questions or information I may want on my sample topic and together we sort them into categories. In the end I choose a category to begin my research. Then students do the same with their topic. If students get stuck or have difficulty finding information during Big6 4.0, they can always revisit these questions and choose another focus for their research.

Information Seeking Strategies (Big6, 2.0) is an opportunity for students to really use their creativity and another great place for discussion. When we come to this point in the unit, I have found that it is useful to brainstorm all possible sources for information together (encourage them to really get creative here!), then have each student chose four sources to start with for finding information on their research topic. I always have my students choose one source that is unique or unusual. This could be a family member, a brochure, the phone book, a menu... who knows?

When students reach Big6 3.0, Location and Access, I ask them to fill out the resource list sheet as they go. This accomplishes several purposes. First, it provides them (and me) with an "at-a-glance" record of resources they've found, preventing repeats or lost citations. Second, it provides a map of their research strategy, which makes it easy to evaluate this aspect of the unit. Finally, it makes the construction of a bibliography a snap. Even if students do not ultimately pull and use information from all of the resources for their speech, listing resources consulted is an excellent habit to develop.

Evaluating the Unit

So, did this unit meet my lazy requirements? To review...

1) It would be done completely in class:

Students completion of the Big6 packet and speech-writing are done during the regular class sessions (no outside homework unless a child does not use their time wisely in class... but that never happens,

right?)

2) It would not involve any extensive papers to correct:

Apart from looking at the student's completed Big6 packets, the teacher has no stack of papers to sift through, but evaluates each student on the content and delivery of their speech.

3) It would allow students who did not traditionally do well in Language Arts to meet with some success:

Students who may not be the best writers can hopefully shine in the areas of research and/or public-speaking and their grade may benefit.

4) It would be more student-centered than most projects, providing individuals an opportunity to study a topic of interest to them:

Students have learned something more about a topic they may not normally have had time to research in the confines of the rest of the curriculum. Yet we've met curriculum standards for research, public speaking, and so forth.

5) It would expose students to the importance of effective research skills and help them begin to develop those skills for future use:

Students have had a taste of the process for doing effective research and will be ready to apply Big6 to other situations in their life when they experience a “knowledge gap.”

In addition to the experience this exercise provides the students, it allows both the teacher and Media Specialist to share their expertise; each bringing their individual knowledge, skills and teaching styles to the table. As a Media Specialist, I have found it quite rewarding to spread the word on how to do effective research using the sweetly simple process of the Big6. Yet, simple does not mean basic, because the Big6 lends itself to wonderfully complex learning opportunities. As our years with the Big6 Research Project has shown us, it can be a multi-layered process that lends itself beautifully to sub-units on proper Internet searching, bias in sources, plagiarism, citations, and so forth. No two Big6 Packets have ever been the same, because the teachers and I are always adjusting the unit based on student feedback and our own ongoing evaluation of its success.

Final Thoughts

In an ever-changing world, the Big6 is a powerful tool to help prepare our students for survival in the 21st Century workforce. The country has moved from the industrial age to the digital age, and student's learning experiences should reflect that shift. It is increasingly important for educators to acknowledge the importance of providing students opportunities to develop broader life skills. More and more the emphasis is placed not on what students know, but how they manipulate the wealth of information available to them. As educational pundit Willard Daggett states in his article, “Reforming American High Schools - Why, What and How,”-

“Successful schools tend to envision a system focused on the future. The goal is to teach students how to think - not simply what to know” and “The schools that have achieved success also understand that they need to teach students to do things not simply by rote, but rather with a deeper level understanding.”

By using the Big6 model to develop student's research skills and providing individuals the opportunity to become motivated by their own interests, the Big6 Research Project challenges students to evaluate their progress as they go through the research process. As a result of this reflection and in-depth focus on one topic, they will hopefully gain a deeper understanding of what constitutes effective research and the subject itself. The goal of the unit is not solely to learn more about a topic or give a speech, but to call attention to the skills and methods useful for gathering and analyzing information which students can then apply to future research projects (for example papers, multi-media presentations).

Throughout the unit students are generating ideas, investigating, analyzing, categorizing, setting goals, presenting, summarizing, synthesizing, evaluating, speaking, writing, listening... the list of life skills they are engaged in is nearly endless. The unit also provides opportunities to start a dialogue with students about ethical behavior, giving educators logical segues to discussions on such topics as plagiarism, the importance of citing sources, and how to recognize various forms of bias in the media.

Educators and students alike have embraced the Big6 Research Project. By sharing this experience it is my hope that other educators will find the ideas useful. Whether you are a social studies teacher who would like students to compare and contrast various wars, a science teacher exploring the impact of scientific advancements on ethics, a third grade teacher assigning country reports or a kindergarten teacher asking students to gather information on a favorite animal, some or all of the BIG 6 Research Project can be incorporated to accomplish these tasks. I've enjoyed this opportunity to share it with you, and leave you with this final thought from author Doris Lessing,

“That is what learning is. You suddenly understand something you've understood all your life, but in a new way.”

Many of our students have been engaged in activities that they may define as “research” in their educational experience. Hopefully this Big6 unit will give both students and educators a true understanding of research in a new and interesting way, staving off laziness and promoting motivation.

Resources

Daggett, Willard R. *Reforming American High Schools - Why, What, and How*. Taken from Performance Learning Systems, Inc. Teaching the Skills of the 21st Century course book. Reprinted with permission by International Center for Leadership in Education, Rexford, NY.