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# Engaging Students in the Research Process: Comparing Approaches Used with Diverse Learners in Two Urban High School Classrooms

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## ENGAGING STUDENTS IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS

### **Introduction**

Students' performance on academic tasks is linked to their level of motivation and engagement. In general, motivation can be defined as "a student's willingness to work hard to learn course material even if it does not lead to a better grade, a student's willingness to read more than required in a class because of interest, and the extent to which a student enjoys the challenge of learning complicated new material" (An, 2015, p. 110). Engagement means, "one is involved and immersed in an activity (Ford & Opitz, 2015, p. 34). Motivation and engagement typically work hand-in-hand to foster students' active learning and participation. Furthermore, "when students are engaged, they enjoy what they are doing" (Ford & Opitz, 2015, p. 39). Other examples of academic engagement behaviors displayed by students include "how often students [ask] questions in class or [contribute] to class discussion and how often students [come] to class without completing reading or assignments" (An, 2015, p. 110).

Motivation is complex and multidimensional because it depends upon the learner—specifically his or her learning style and interest (Ford & Opitz, 2015) as well as environmental factors such as classroom instruction and the curricular materials. Therefore, academic engagement can focus on the teacher as well as the students because the learner and the learning environment are equally important in academic achievement (Laursen, 2015). The teacher's role in engagement is to create learning opportunities that reflect the interest of students and use of stimulating tasks and multiple resources to enhance the curriculum (Guthrie & Alao, 1997; Guthrie & Cox, 2001; Guthrie, Wigfield, Humenick, Perencevich, Taboada, & Barbosa, 2006; Wigfield, Guthrie, Tonks, & Perencevich, 2004).

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In sum, the research asserts that motivation and engagement are critical elements in the teaching and learning cycle. Teachers need to consider the curriculum content as well as ways in which assigned tasks and learning experiences connect to students' interests. Furthermore, students need opportunities that build upon and challenge what they know, experiences that facilitate exploration of new topics, and inquiry-based tasks that allow students to work with peers, share ideas, and make real-world connections.

### **Background**

In this paper we describe how two high school teachers (co-authors) reconceptualized a research assignment found in most high school curricula – the research paper – to engage students in the research process. Both teachers worked with similar groups of students. The students, identified as struggling readers and at-risk students because they failed the state test in English language arts/literacy, included students learning English as a new language, and students with disabilities in an inclusion setting.

Guided by the question, How can high school teachers better engage struggling readers in the research process?, we draw upon evidence gleaned from both classrooms to document authentic, practices and strategies used to support students' research skills. Action research was used to explore teachers' decision-making about curricular and instructional choices during intentional teaching (Ford & Opitz, 2015). We wanted to learn how the activities were designed and implemented to foster students' engagement and motivation during the research process. We collected and examined instructional artifacts such as lesson plans, activities, and teachers' reflective notes along with students' work samples (e.g., projects, assignments) to document and characterize the instructional practices in these classrooms.

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### **Nancy's Approach**

Nancy completed her action research project during the 2011–2012 academic year at Peterson High School (school names are pseudonyms). During her study, the school had 2598 students enrolled in grades 9 through 12. Most of the students, 52.2%, were female, 88% were Hispanic, 7.7% were Black, 3% were Asian, and 1% was White. Most of the students (77%) were eligible for free or reduced lunch. Demographics of her classes were proportional to the school. In 2010, 63.2% of the students (who were seniors at the time of the study) demonstrated proficiency on the State Language Arts Literacy assessment. Assessment results were not available for the students who were juniors because the test is only administered to 11<sup>th</sup> graders and those students were in 10<sup>th</sup> grade in 2010. Five classes participated in the study—two classes of juniors, three of seniors.

The average number of students per class was 18. Some classes had 25 or more students, but at the time of the study the senior classes were under 15 students each. Students were in Nancy's reading class because they had either failed to pass the state test as juniors or, based on academic performance in previous years, they were considered at risk of failing the test and were in the class for extra support. In other words, all of the students in the class who were eligible based on school criteria to take the state test failed it, and all of the students were reading below grade level. Students were a combination of reluctant and remedial readers and students whose English speaking skills were not strong enough to pass the high stakes test.

In Nancy's classes the core reading material was a series of books aimed at reluctant readers in urban communities, a textbook, Langan's *Ten Skills You Really Need to Succeed in School* (Townsend Press, 2001), as well as a skills workbook for test preparation. In addition,

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Nancy used novels primarily for independent reading. The novels were authentic texts of high interest to teens.

During the first part of this multi-part unit, students self-selected three narratives from a series of Townsend Press anthologies all of which focused on the theme of “overcoming obstacles to achieve success”(See Appendix A). At this stage of the project, students took notes, used a template to organize an outline, and used their outline to write a five- paragraph essay including a works cited page. This gave students a very structured opportunity to experience the skills they would need to write an independent research paper (See Appendix B).

Next, working together, each class generated a list of topics discussed in the readings as well as other topics of high interest to them. The purpose was to select a topic they would be interested in learning more about for their independent research. The “winning” topic was gangs. This was not a topic directly addressed in the Townsend books, but was a topic of high interest to the students. It is a topic that is not routinely discussed in school but was a major concern in their lives.

Once the general topic was chosen, to build their research skills before letting them work on the independent portion of the project. Nancy provided them with some background reading about gangs (see Table 1). These were print sources provided by Nancy because the class had not done any reading about gangs prior to their selection of the topic. This part of the unit included reading entire articles, as well as excerpts from more difficult articles followed by jigsaw discussion of the content.

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Table 1: Select Examples of Readings about Gangs

- Howell, James C. "Gang Prevention: An Overview of Research and Programs." *Juvenile Justice System Bulletin*. U.S. Department of Justice. Dec. 2010, pp. 1-22.
- Johnson, Jan. "Jobs not Jails." *PRISM Magazine*. 05 2011: 10-17. Mar. 2012.
- "Tookie Williams." 2012. Biography.com. 18 Mar. 2012.

Next, students self-selected a narrower topic to research. By allowing students to self-select the topics Nancy wanted to engage them in the project and use the opportunity to build their research skills. Using self-selected research topics was a strategic decision because Nancy wanted to use students' interest in a topic to help support their academic literacy development, particularly in conducting research. Figure 1 shows an example of a handout provided to students to guide them through analysis of their self-selected article.

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**Conducting Research**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
 Topic \_\_\_\_\_  
 Instructions: Use this handout to analyze the source (article). Complete one handout for **each** source. Then you can use your notes to help prepare your research report.

### Close Reading and Analyzing Sources

**BEFORE:** PREVIEW the article before you read it.

1. Who wrote this article? What types of books does she write? Where does he/she live?
2. What does the article seem to be about?
3. What do you think is going on in the photos, graphs, or charts (if available)?

**DURING:** While you read the article, UNDERLINE important points. Stop every now and then to reflect on what you are reading. Try to make connections... Jot down your notes and key points on the back of this handout.

**AFTER:**

1. In a few words.... What was the article about?
2. Copy 1 or 2 quotes from the article. What is the connection of each quote to the main idea and/or overall theme of the article?
3. What type of source is this? Does the type of source affect whether or not it is a reliable source of information? Explain.

Figure 1: Handout used to scaffold students' close reading of informational texts and primary sources.

Nancy based her decision to implement a structured research project on three issues impacting her students' practices: (1) research was not being emphasized in the curriculum; (2) her school had limited access to computers at that time and the students research skills when they did have access, tended to be limited to cutting and pasting random information without crediting the source or, even making much of an effort to understand what they were cutting and pasting; and (3) available library online sources were very cumbersome for her students to work with. She

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wanted students to be more prepared for college reading and writing expectations, particularly with locating, and using primary sources. While the students had some familiarity with the writer's workshop approach, revising and editing was not their strength. Therefore, the research task was modeled not on writing a traditional research report, but on a 5-paragraph essay because this was the model expected on the state tests required to graduate from high school.

In this third and final part of the project, students were limited to using only online sources. As locating and evaluating sources is a core academic expectation in college, Nancy wanted students to have this experience. In addition, this gave her an opportunity to directly address the students' previous practices; the tendency to cut and paste information without attribution.

As students read and started their research, they further refined their topics. Self-selected topics including children born into gangs, gangs and graffiti, gangs in the military, gang symbols, girls and gangs, MS-13, social media and gangs, and why youth join gangs—the most popular choice. Nancy noted that during the third phase of the project, students were expected to select three on-line articles about their topic from reliable sources. This requirement was later reduced to two because it proved to be too onerous for the students given their sporadic access to computers.

- take notes (changed to highlighting).
- write a thesis statement.
- write a 5- paragraph research essay.
- use in-text citations – MLA format.
- create a works cited page in MLA format.
- create a cover page.



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- Students shared their research via poster presentations.

Nancy reported that grades on each part of project ranged from A to F (students who did not turn in the work or work was unacceptable or incomplete). Most students completed the assignment. The majority earned a high C to mid B. Students' subsequent performances were excellent on the state test or Special Review Assessment (SRA), which is an alternative assessment to the state test. All students who took the SRA passed the test.

Nancy also found that students “were interested in the reading material. In the first part of the project, the readings were self-selected (in a structured way) and were on their reading level. In most cases, they were able to make personal connections to the personal narratives of the writers.” In the second part, where the students were provided with a wider range of reading material, the students reported that two of the readings she assigned (college-level texts) were difficult. Her purpose was to expose them to college level expectations, but this was frustrating to them. When it came to the independent research part, “some students still resisted the hard work of engaging in serious research, especially the deep reading and critical analysis needed to produce a quality research paper.” In her reflection, Nancy noted, “Most of the source material they found, while reliable, was long and above their reading level. Students were interested in the topic, but were frustrated by the difficulty and length of the texts.”

Nancy chose to design and implement an intensive, highly structured research project to scaffold the students. Throughout this unit, she provided students with various templates and prompts to scaffold them through the research process. (See appendices A and B for two examples.) She believes that combining these practices helped to support students' academic development. The intensive scaffolding was the crux of the approach because students needed support in all aspects of the research process. The whole project was built on a step-by-step

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gradual release of responsibility model. Nancy's reflection provides some insight into the implementation of her research project.

### **Tiffany's Approach**

Tiffany completed her action research project during the 2014–2015 school year. In 2014–2015 there were 2123 students enrolled at Lowry High School: 16% Asian, 14% Black, 60% Hispanic, 9% White, 12% English Language Learners, and 18% Students with Special Needs. The number of students making progress towards graduation (78%) was about 6% below the city average. Similarly only 36% (about 10% below the city average) demonstrated college and career expectations. Tiffany completed her project with 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students. Her classes were representative of the whole school.

In her 9th grade inclusion English class, which included special education and general education students, Tiffany taught a unit called, "Change the World." The unit (see Appendix C and D for unit overview and lesson excerpt) focused on creating research-based arguments. The goal of the research was to obtain information about the topic and convince a fictitious funder to give money their organization. During the unit, students were taught how to choose a topic; how to obtain information about their topic; and how to organize the information for their project. Tiffany used strategic decisions for grouping students to organize her class for this project. She identified team leaders who supported the team through the entire process. The criteria for the grouping were based on observational data in her classroom. Some students who demonstrated leadership skills were chosen and some with characteristics such good listener, patient, persistence were chosen to lead the teams. Tiffany attempted to create a workplace culture in the classroom to simulate a real world experience. Daily, students set small goals and worked as a team to meet their final goals. Tiffany highlighted particular group that began with 8 members

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of the team, but later split into two separate companies because they could not agree on their issue. Some people in the group were passionate about global warming, while the other group didn't know what they wanted to do, but they knew they didn't want to be another global warming group. After discussing with the team, Tiffany instructed the severed teams that they were accountable for the same work, with fewer members. Both teams were motivated to outshine one another and this resulted in some of the best work of the school year. Tiffany stated, "Project based learning brought the best out of my students."

At the beginning of the group project, students were asked to choose a local, national or global issue. Students were given one class period to brainstorm and narrow their topics. Students then were asked to come up with one specific topic and discuss reasons why this topic was important to the world. One group in Tiffany's class chose teen homelessness. One reason for their choice was interest, but the other reason for the choice is because at least one of the team members had a personal connection to the topic. They believed that people needed to have more awareness of the issue. Once they came up with three reasons why the funder should support their cause, they divided their groups into smaller groups for research to support their assigned reason. During this part of the process, students read articles, watched video and collected evidence to support their reasons. To help students collect information for the project,

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Tiffany used the KWL+S graphic organizer.

Topic: \_\_\_\_\_

Know	Want to know?	Learned	Source of information

The graphic organizer captured information about students' prior knowledge, what they wanted to know, specifically inquiry questions, and what they learned, the new information, as well as the source of the information. Students were required to document all sources used to collect information throughout the research process. Students used their cell phones to conduct research by brainstorming the topic. Groups were charged to assign each member of the group a specific role:

- Scribe (2) - will jot down information for the group
- Research team members - will research information and report it to the scribe
- Timekeeper - will keep time and support the research team
- Speaker - will share out the group's findings to the class

In these groups, students chose a real-world issue and identified a solution for addressing the problem. Other topics selected were Global Warming, Homelessness in America, Women's

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Rights. Students argued why their social issue was most important and the students deepened their knowledge of their chosen topics. Each group researched, selected, and read several texts connected to their topic. To communicate with their target audience about the “problem” under investigation, the students created informational brochures, business cards, and PowerPoint presentations.

Tiffany also incorporated social and academic procedures into the classroom to foster student reflection and teacher-student mentoring. Throughout the project, students maintained a reflective journal to document what they were learning about their topic and the research process. Upon completion of the project students responded to journal prompts such as

- One thing I learned about myself after doing this project is ...
- I liked/hated this project because...
- If I could change one thing relating to this project I would...

Tiffany created an online blog and discussion forum to “motivate” and “support” students so they worked consistently on projects. She reported that the online interactions helped to empower students who appeared to be “down on themselves” and did not feel they could “achieve long term goals.” She found that students needed ongoing encouragement to persist through academic tasks such as homework, writing assignments, and projects. Tiffany found that students need a compelling “why?” when learning a topic. They want to know that what they were learning would help them later on in life. In her reflection, Tiffany stated,

I exposed my students to several real-world experiences that supported the curriculum. Students created websites, entries on discussion boards, mock businesses, speeches, and used Google Drive to share, publish, and collaborate with others. Students also used annotation programs like “Skitch” to annotate online texts. [I believe] all of

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these skills and tasks will help to make my students more college and career ready, but also create a mindset of excellence in the classroom.

While Tiffany's students completed their research projects, she observed that they were "highly motivated to find and share the information they learned." For example, one student "Zaire", a student with spotty attendance, came more regularly to class because of the expectations set by her team to be prepared for the project. Zaire was a part of a collaborative group whose company focused on the equal rights of women. These young women went beyond the project by creating company T-shirts with their original logos and names on the back. They had not only demonstrated motivation, they made a very compelling research based argument. They used a reference to the "Ain't I woman", a speech by Sojourner Truth the class read earlier in the school year to build their arguments during their presentation. Another student "Ariel", was observed encouraging an unmotivated peer in her group, she said "We have a project to do and we all have to work to get the job done, by the end of the period, I need for you to..." Ariel's leadership during this project shows how the student-centered nature of Tiffany's project empowered students to communicate clear expectations where students were accountable to their peers. Tiffany recalls that on the day of the presentation, students laid out their business cards, brochures and set up their PowerPoint presentations with pride. They came to class dressed in business attire, some wearing shirts and ties. She also created a bulletin board to share students' work and enable students to see what others were doing.

Tiffany noted that the project helped students demonstrate proficiency in their knowledge of research (e.g., locating sources, using/citing evidence to support their argument). For example during the presentations, some students were observed using academic vocabulary related to their topic, not using cue cards or notes to elaborate on data on the PowerPoint slides, making

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connections to class texts such as articles read earlier in the year, using different argument techniques taught throughout the year namely Ethos, Logos, Pathos. Although students' use of quantitative data such as statistics used superficial, the data they incorporated into their presentation was relevant and appropriate to their topic. Tiffany felt that because students were invested in the self-selected topics they conducted extensive research; going beyond if she had required them to locate 3 or 4 sources. For instance, one group sent her a list of 10 sources, along with their notes and group assignments (solutions for global warming - "Charlie"; vocabulary - "Javiar"; impact/effects - "Mark"). Tiffany recalls that students' use of academic vocabulary about their topic was significant. All of the students used words that were not previously taught in class, nor were they words encountered in previous readings. Students' performance on group projects assigned earlier in the year was much lower level than the Save the World Project (see Table 2).

Table 2: Students' Performance on Group Projects

Ranking	Previous Research Project	Save the World Project
90-100%	1%	25%
80-89%	40%	75%
70-79%	59%	

Rather than waiting until the end of the year to assign a research paper (a traditional approach to incorporating research into the curriculum), Tiffany assigned research papers and other group project earlier in the school year. Prior research lessons include citing sources, identifying and using rhetorical techniques, and using argument strategies. Tiffany believes that previous research experiences helped prepare students for the Save the World Project. During the June

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project, the daily attendance was above 90%, suggesting that the students were engaged and accountable to their peers during the Save the World Project. In her final reflection, Tiffany felt that this type of project in 9<sup>th</sup> grade was significant because students developed and honed their skills in collaboration and inquiry.

### **Conclusion**

Learning to learn is critical in the 21st century. Today, students are bombarded with a plethora of information and resources to navigate, evaluate, and synthesize. In this context students' self-efficacy as learners, tenacity, metacognition, and other dispositions enable them to work collaboratively to problem-solve and examine solutions to real issues (Partnership for Twenty-First Century Skills, 2016). Motivation can greatly influence a student's academic performance (Ford & Opitz, 2015). During adolescence, students show motivation and engagement in academic tasks when they work together with peers on projects that reflect the real world. Therefore, intentional teaching where teachers scaffold students' learning and facilitate opportunities for authentic learning experiences that challenge students, provide students with choice, as well as offer opportunities to connect to the real world will motivate and engage students as active learners. We found that intentional pedagogy (Ford & Opitz, 2015) fosters students' skills by (a) providing students with choices, opportunities for ownership and mastery; and (b) drawing upon real-life problems and authentic learning opportunities to connect content to students' interest (Laursen, 2015). This instructional approach enables teachers to design experiences to engage and motivate students.

As mentioned, Nancy and Tiffany redesigned the research unit in their classroom to engage and motivate students. There were several commonalities across both classrooms. The activities in both classrooms were implemented to meet academic standards. Choice appeared to



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be an important factor in engaging students. In both Nancy and Tiffany's classes the students appeared to be interested in the classroom activities. We noticed that students were most engaged when completing research that emerged from questions they generated. Both classrooms incorporated real-world skills and authentic material into the curriculum. To facilitate the learning process, the instructional choices of both teachers show they spent time breaking down the research process and focusing more on the process rather than on the final product. Both Nancy and Tiffany perceived this approach to be helpful and stated that students met expectations.

Some differences evident in the strategies Nancy and Tiffany implemented in their research assignment appeared to be the nature of the choice provided to the students; specifically the amount of choice students were provided when asked to complete academic tasks. Although both teachers gave students choices, the options in Nancy's class were predominantly teacher-directed. Whereas the open-ended components of the Change the World projects in Tiffany's class allowed students to be creative, work collaboratively, and make real-world connections. While the Change the World project engaged students through challenge, controversy, collaboration, and competition, the research projects in Nancy's class were independent and focused on expectations evident in traditional research papers. Another distinction, which might impact the level of engagement and motivation in these classrooms, was the type of texts, especially the integration of technology evident in Tiffany's class. Although both projects facilitated opportunities for students to use technology, students in Nancy's class worked predominately with print sources and templates supplied by the teacher, while the materials used in Tiffany's class were student-selected, or created by students. We found that if the task was too

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easy, redundant, or did not reflect authentic, real-world connections then students lost interest quickly and were less likely to complete the task.

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## Appendix A: List of Books Read from Townsend Press Series

- *Facing Addiction* edited by Beth Johnson
- *It Couldn't Happen to Me: Three True Stories of Teenage Moms* edited by Beth Johnson
- *La Vida Real: True Stories of Latino Students Today* edited by Tanya Savory
- *Reading Changed My Life* edited by Beth Johnson
- *Surviving Abuse: Four True Stories* edited by Beth Johnson

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## Appendix B: Templates for note taking and outlining for Part I of the project

Osborn/HSPA

Inspiring Lives Readings

Name \_\_\_\_\_

**CITATION INFORMATION**

Author \_\_\_\_\_

Chapter Title \_\_\_\_\_

Book Title \_\_\_\_\_

Copyright Date \_\_\_\_\_

Page Numbers \_\_\_\_\_

Publisher \_\_\_\_\_

Print.

**NOTES**

1. **Who** is this chapter about?
2. **What** is the main obstacle/problem this person had to overcome in this story?
3. Briefly explain **how** this person overcame this problem.
4. **What** is the life lesson that the writer wants you to remember?
5. How does this person's story **CONNECT** to your life?

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Osborn/HSPA

Inspiring Lives Research Essay

Name \_\_\_\_\_

**OUTLINE**

- I. INTRODUCTION – including a thesis statement.
  
- II. FIRST INSPIRING PERSON: Important information. Must include the life lesson this person learned. MUST include at least one quote from the chapter about the person.
  - A.
  - B.
  - C.
  - D. In text citation format: “.....” (author last name page number)
  
- III. SECOND INSPIRING PERSON: Important information. Must include the life lesson this person learned. MUST include at least one quote from the chapter about the person.
  - A.
  - B.
  - C.
  - D. In text citation format: “.....” (author last name page number)
  
- IV. THIRD INSPIRING PERSON: Important information. Must include the life lesson this person learned. MUST include at least one quote from the chapter about the person.
  - A.
  - B.
  - C.

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- D. In text citation format: “.....” (author last name page number)
- V. CONNECT or apply these life lessons to your own life and conclude the essay.

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### Appendix C: Change the World Research Project Unit Overview

#### Change the World Companies

#### 9th Grade: Research Based Arguments

**Essential Question:** How can we convince someone to support a national or international cause?

**Final Performance Task:** In teams, research a topic/issue of your choice and present an argument for why I should provide your organization with ten million dollars.

#### **Standards:**

- Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
  - a. Develop factual, interpretive, and evaluative questions for further exploration of the topic(s).
- Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person's life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.
- Read complex informational text
- Write arguments
- Participate in collaborative discussion
- Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology's capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.
- Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

#### **Steps:**

1. Choose a topic-think about if your topic or issue can change the world.
2. Research your topic--Get information from 8 or more sources (2 per team member). Be sure to cite your evidence and create a bibliography page. --Why should we support your cause? How will my support change the world?
3. Create a company name/logo/motto----stationary---business cards and letterheads
4. Create a pamphlet that shares information about your issue/company.
5. Create a Power Point/ Prezi presentation promoting your organization (One slide should include a chart or budget for how you plan to spend the ten million dollars.
6. Present a professional presentation to a panel of philanthropist. (Yes this means you must be dressed up!)

#### **Assessment:**

A score sheet will be used to assess each group's presentation and final project on a scale of 1 to 10.



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## Score Sheet

Company Names	Argument Strategies	Creativity	Elements of Project	Use of Research

Comments:

1-10- 1 being missing-----> 10 superb

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### Appendix D: Introductory Lesson

**Aim:** How can we use a list generated through collaborative brainstorming, to identify a researchable topic?

**Standard:** Participate in collaborative discussions.

**Quick Write:** If you could change one thing about the world, what would it be and why? Develop your argument with reasons and explanations

**Mini Lesson:** Introduction to the “Change the World” Project

**Active Engagement:**

Students will review the project requirements and then develop 1 or 2 questions they have about the project.

The teacher will break students into four groups. Group leaders will be: 1. AD, 2. BC, 3. LS, 4. MR

**Group Work Time:** Students will use the chart provided to begin to brainstorm national, international or global issues

### **Brainstorming**

<b>National issues</b>	<b>International issues</b>	<b>Global issues</b>

Use the following questions to guide your group’s discussion:

1. Why is this issue important?
2. How might one million dollars change this issue?
3. Who will be impacted? How will they be impacted?
4. What are your top three topics?
5. What topic are you going to choose for this project?

**Share:** What topics did your group come up with? What topic did your group choose? Why?

