

Teaching from the heart: Guiding adolescent writers to literate lives

Jessie Singer, Ruth Shagoury Hubbard

High school seniors in this English class designed their final projects around a personal passion.

Humor and laughter are my passions—they sustain me. They will not be leaving my life, slowly moving into the background the way a book or an essay inevitably does. They will be here, in me, around me, far beyond your classroom. This project extends as far as anyone wants to take it because a passion is not stuffed in a garbage bag and put up in the attic, it stays with us.

Alison

The project was a good idea, I think. I believe that people put more into a project when it's meaningful to them, when they're passionate about something. It was also the first project that I was able to choose the topic right down to the kind of art I was going to do. It was empowering and frightening at the same time, but I liked it.

Paul

This project was definitely different than the other ones we had. On this, we spent about a month searching about our own passion, interviewing people, presenting, and lots more. I wasn't given a topic to search about and write. This one came from our heart, teaching us about ourselves.

Zerina

Teaching a diverse population of adolescents like Alison, Paul, and Zerina (all students' names are pseudonyms) to be "real writers" requires funda-

mental changes in classroom practice. It's more than adopting a new up-to-date curriculum or adding innovative strategies to a teaching "bag of tricks," more than a set of episodes to explore and "learn." It takes place in the classroom and beyond the walls of the school—combining academic with

experiential and community-based learning. It requires nothing less than re-creating our classrooms to radiate the passion of learning. Doing this good work is challenging, messy, and complex, and it requires an answer to the question "What does a successful English classroom *do*?"

Jessie Singer (first author) teaches adolescent writers at a diverse U.S.

urban high school in Portland, Oregon. Her students draw from a mostly working-class population, with about 25% speaking a language other than English as their first language. In her English classes, bursting with 30-plus bodies, she creates an environment that lets students see themselves as "real" writers. They are not just writing to the test, or writing to fill pages; they are engaged in the pursuit of "good work" for real audiences. For two years (2000–2002), Ruth Shagoury Hubbard (first author) has been a member of Jessie's class for one or two mornings a week. As resident researcher in the class, she participates in the activities of the classroom, takes field notes, interviews the students, and collects samples of their work.

As coresearchers and coauthors, we—Jessie and Ruth—are collaborating on this project,

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collecting evidence on what works—and why. Students are key informants in this process. Our research questions include the following: What strategies for literacy instruction help students from different backgrounds expand their reading and writing abilities? What differences emerge for students with differing needs? How do we differentiate instruction while keeping high expectations for all students?

We often hear lip service paid to how important it is that students learn to be “lifelong learners,” yet in order to do that, they must know how to connect their interests and passions to continued learning. The spring term with seniors is when teachers are particularly aware of what a brief time remains to make that connection. Too often, this can feel like a losing battle, with these young adults already living a few months in the future, daydreaming of their lives beyond high school. A colleague with more experience than Jessie’s three years told her that spring semester with seniors is a waste: “They check out. My advice—put a movie in front of them and hope to see them half the time.” This advice did not sit well with Jessie and made her determined to create meaningful final weeks of the year for her and her students: “I love my senior classes. I don’t want to see them half the time.”

As a teacher who works to implement critical literacy practices in her classroom, Jessie crafted curricular units with her students all year that helped them foster their literacy skills in a context of questioning fairness, justice, and equity. While her reading and writing workshops are structured along the general guidelines of constructivist classrooms (Atwell, 1998; Rief, 1992), she also teaches reading and writing as liberating acts, helping her students imagine a different kind of society (Christensen, 2000).

In her classroom, Jessie works to find a balance between establishing choice in study and exploration and providing structure in skill and social development. For example, in the unit on South African literature, students all read *Kaffir Boy* (Mathabane, 1986), role playing, reading pri-

mary sources, and writing essays. Choice entered in when the students were given a list of dozens of titles from South Africa to assist in their selection of books for their weekly reading workshop. Assignments grew from the books they chose rather than from a common text. Other units focused on areas such as “The Politics of Language,” and “Poetry of Protest.” (For more information on Jessie Singer as a critical literacy teacher and a view of her classroom teaching, see Lindsay, 2000.)

Throughout the year, one of Jessie’s main curricular goals was to pay attention to and seek out the voices of those who have been disenfranchised or silenced—in literature, in history, and in contemporary society. As we talked about the seniors’ final work, we realized that the genuine voices and passions of adolescents had not been the main focus of the classroom work; their choices had danced around the edges of the curriculum, but never been invited into the center. As adults, we tend to make assumptions about what teenagers care about, what they spend their time doing, and what sustains them.

In crafting a curriculum project to be a bridge to her students’ future literate lives, Jessie asked herself what real-world learners do to maintain rich, textured lives. “What outside of my career sustains me and provides me with comfort and meaning?” she mused.

Yoga frees the clutter in my mind after long days of work. I also love to garden, travel, and hike. How is this related to my teaching and my seniors?.... I began to think of ways to create curriculum around the passions that sustain my students. I realized that they were about to leap out into the world, some off to colleges and universities, others to community colleges, others to jobs, and some to the unknown and unplanned. I believe as an educator it is my job to prepare all students for college. With that said, I am coming to understand that it is also my hope that students will leave my classes with an understanding that there is value in what they are drawn to and in what happens outside the classroom walls. I want my students to realize the joy and learning they can find through exploring their passions.

The passion project

Jessie began to think of ways to create curriculum around the passions that sustain her students. Rather than stepping away from the social justice focus of her teaching, she expanded her vision of a successful and equitable language arts curriculum to include an opportunity for her students to see that their world is valued, that their cultures—and subcultures—are worthy of investigation.

For the last two months of the year, Jessie's seniors were immersed in exploring a passion with depth, using the reading and writing skills they had honed all year and adding new ones along the way. They began by reading poems and essays about other people's passions and hearing guest speakers. This got their creative juices flowing and helped them identify something they love to do in their lives. Jessie instructed them to choose "what would feel like a joy to learn and think about." The handout Project Expectations and Design provided clear exit requirements for the project and created the basis of the work (see Figure 1). As students became more immersed in their work, Jessie continued to refine their assignments and the expectations of the project to fit students' needs in their writing, research, reading, and explorations. The project culminated in a final portfolio (see Figure 2).

In the final two months of the school year, we witnessed young adults act as real readers and writers in pursuit of learning and in sharing their knowledge. As resident researcher in Jessie's classroom, Ruth took part in the joys of discovery with the classroom community and also looked closely at what we, as educators, can learn from this kind of teaching practice. In this article, we share our preliminary findings and the teaching strategies and learning that provided the necessary foundation.

Choice

Choice isn't a new idea in education or in literacy development in particular. However, *genuine*

choice, at the heart of this project, was extremely important to these young adults and their learning process. In many ways, Jessie helped her seniors unveil what they were drawn to—their passions and, perhaps for some, even their callings in life. Students made choices without strings attached. They were not influenced by guessing what their teacher wanted—or by censoring choices based on their friends' and their classmates' perceptions. Students were able to make these choices because they had participated in creating a community of learning throughout the year.

In many writing classes, students are able to write a paper focusing on something they care about. Through Ruth's field notes and our numerous discussions, we pinpointed a difference; something more was going on in Jessie's class. These young adults and their teacher entered a process that helped crystallize what was meaningful to the students. Furthermore, throughout this project Jessie provided nets and ropes and trellises for support. She was ever-present—not only as a model, which was surely an important role, but also as a kind of "spotter." Early on, rather than simply setting the students loose within a void, she provided ways for them to discover what they had been drawn to. When she introduced the idea of the passion project to the class, she asked for their "first thoughts" on a topic, so she would know who needed help. Dhyana, for example, wrote that she needed some ideas:

Dear Ms. Singer,
I don't have any idea what I want to explore in my life. But I don't know how much you know me and I would [like] to get some ideas from you. My inspiration was all about clothes. If I did something about clothes, what am I going to write about. So, Miss Singer, if you have any ideas, please let me know or maybe I would have to think of something else.
Thank you,
Dhyana

The students displayed some indecision about what they might choose for a passion—which is normal. This indecision prompted Jessie

Figure 1

Project expectations and design

You will have a lot of freedom in the planning and creation of this project. I want to make it clear what my expectations are. You will need to do the following in order to succeed in this unit and pass this class:

Please choose a topic that you are passionate about—something that does not feel like work; instead it should feel like a joy to learn and think about.

Next, I would like you to design your course of study and outcomes. I will help you with this design, with guidelines, but I want you to be the person who makes this project happen the way you imagine it.

Expectations

1. **Novel of choice**—You must read a book related to your topic. This book *must* be a novel. (I will only make a few exceptions.) *If* you have found other books that will help you in your process—great. Please include these in your bibliography—but they do not replace your need to find and read a novel.

The date when this novel must be with you *in class*: April 10 (100 points)

Date book must be read: April 30

2. **Interview**—I would like you to interview someone who is related in some way to your topic. For example, if I am doing a project on Ashtanga Yoga, I will then interview an Ashtanga teacher. If your project is on the art of comic strips, you can interview someone who creates comics. If your project is on painting—interview an artist.

Due date: April 30 (150 points)

3. **Art or visual**—I would like you to *create* an artistic or visual expression of your topic.

Due date: April 23

4. **Writing**—There will be a variety of in-class writing pieces to include in your project. I would like you to write an explanation for each project. Your explanation should include your process and reasoning behind each piece.

Here are some of the pieces that must be included:

(a) Why you chose your topic (completed in class week of 4/2–4/6)

(b) The turning point—the story of finding this passion (completed 4/2–4/6)

(c) Written response to novel—in class May 1

(d) Interview

(e) Explanations

(f) Reflection letter

(g) Writing of your choice that connects to your project—for example, if you are studying poetry, include poems of your own

Points to be earned in this category (1,000)

5. **Connection to Subject**—Please include a project that shows your connection to this subject. This may be, for example, a photo essay, an art piece, an essay, a recording, a film, a comic strip, or a fiction piece.

Due date: May 7 (500 points)

6. **Presentation**—Each of you will schedule a presentation date in May. Presentations will start the week of May 14 and run through the last week of May. Your presentation *must* involve others, teach about your topic, and unveil your passion.

ALL PROJECTS DUE MAY 14

NOTICE: The above expectations are exit requirements for this project and for this class. You may not pass this class if these requirements are not met and met on schedule!

Figure 2 Checklist

Journal entries

- 4/8/02 List of passions
- 4/15/02 A ritual to read to each other (loosely related—optional)
- 4/24/02 Interviews
- 5/1/02 What makes a good teacher?
- 5/3/02 Reason for loving...
- 5/8/02 What did you get out of your interview?

Reflections/responses

- Turning point
- Artist statement/peer and teacher responses
- Art show response
- Project of choice reflection
- Interview
- Book responses/reflection: A letter to....

Plans

- “Creating a Game Plan”
- “Art Project and Artist Statement” worksheet
- Presentation plan(s)

Other

- Include any notes to or from Ms. Singer relating to your project

Turned in after presentation

- Final reflection letter (answer any four questions)
- Presentation peer responses

to create writing opportunities to dig deeper into their thinking and planning for this project. This led to the “turning point essays.” In this instance, the term *turning point* is used to define a place (or time) in our lives where (or when) our passion is truly sparked. The “turning point” writing workshop was one of those important learning opportunities that Jessie provided along the way. After sharing a published essay about one photographer’s turning point, we all wrote for 10 minutes on a turning point in our own lives. The writing prompt helped link personal narrative to our passion and also showed that there is a history or reason behind each individual’s interests. This

writing was vital in helping students as they differentiated between something they cared about and something that they were truly passionate about. Another strategy that was crucial to the forward movement of this project was giving students the chance to hear one another’s turning points.

Let us introduce you to Paul, a big, street-smart guy with a truly gentle, kind soul. Paul, unbeknownst to his classmates, friends, and even family, is a poet. We all learned this through his turning point essay:

I remember the first poem I ever wrote for myself not because I was forced by a teacher but because I wanted

to. I came home from practice late that night and my mom asked where I had been and why I had the huge black eye with the cut on the side of my face. I explained that it was from wrestling practice and I was fine. As I went in my room, I began to wish I could have told her the truth and explain how humiliated I was. But if I had she would worry about me even more than she already did. With all my anger, I began to hit my bed and floor. I broke some CD's and other little things. I imagined it was the older boy who had beat me down and his friend who watched and laughed. My face burned with anger and I felt like I was going to explode. I needed to do something. I remembered someone telling me it feels good to write about your problems and I always thought that was bullshit, but I figured why not try?

I began to write and I didn't even write full sentences. The page was full of words that didn't make sense to anyone but me and it was kinda freeing. I wrote about everything going on in my life, first about the boy who humiliated me, then my dad and my home life, then about how I hated my skin color that made me a bit of an outcast at my school. I wrote about how the girls that I was with didn't mean [a thing] and I would give them all up for one girl I could hold. When I was finally done, I looked at the paper through blurry eyes. And felt better. I wanted to rewrite it later 'cause it was saturated in tears and very sloppy. I laid back and felt a heaviness raise off my shoulders. And for the first time I got a good night's sleep.

The turning point writing really helped
Chuck hone in on his passion—shoes.

The first pair of shoes that I really remember would have to be black and white BK nights that I had. They had lights in the heel that would flash every time I would step down on them. I really didn't like shoes a whole lot until my grandpa told me a story about how he only got a pair of shoes every five years because his family was kind of poor. When I heard the every five years, I thought to myself, "that's not going to be me." When I was in the fourth grade, I had a pair of camo slip-ons, no velcro or laces. I went to the school up the street from my house with my mom and brother. The slip-ons were a little too big and whenever I kicked the air they would fly into the air. I wanted to show my mom how high I could kick my shoe. I kicked it off and watched it fly through the air—going, going, gone up on the roof. My mom started to laugh, not me. I got mad at myself.

The slip-ons were the only pair of shoes that I had at the time besides my sandals, so my mom and I had to go to the store to buy another pair. She said this time they have to have laces.

What we discovered after Chuck decided to make shoes his topic is that shoes really *are* his passion. He has over 30 pairs, all in excellent condition because he keeps them in their original boxes and on bad weather days (which Portland, Oregon, is known for) he wears an old pair to school and changes shoes when he gets there. He gets a pair of shoes each Christmas and for his birthday and works at a shoe store so he can get a discount.

As the students conferred with one another and with us and wrote their turning point essays, we learned an important lesson: to honor their choices, even the ones that seemed mundane or simplistic. For example, there were two students about whose choices Ruth became concerned. Leah chose animals because she loves them. Jasmine chose young children because she likes to babysit. Ruth worried that their topics were so broad they would be difficult to focus on and write about, but Jessie explained her belief that we needed to trust these young men and women, continue to provide support, and go with their choices as they would need to learn to do when they were out of school. This remained consistent with Jessie's objective in creating the unit—to expand on her work toward equity and justice and to truly model the kind of community within her classroom where students' values and passions are not judged, molded, or "rated."

Jessie's trust in the two girls was well placed. Leah *does* love animals. As part of her project, she read about endangered gorillas and visited zoos. For community service, Leah spent a day at a humane shelter, writing about and sharing her experiences there. For her classroom teaching, she found a speaker who brought in a support dog and taught the class the ways humans with a variety of disabilities depend on dogs.

In Jasmine, the girl who loves to babysit, Ruth found a kindred spirit. Jasmine doesn't just

“like kids,” she is intrigued by children and their minds. When Ruth shared her passion with the class—for young children’s literacy—she and Jasmine forged a new connection. Jasmine talked about how fascinated she is with children’s minds as they learn language and how she keeps track of their learning as she babysits. For Jasmine’s book of choice linked to her topic, Ruth lent her *The Bridge to School* (Waterland, 1995), a scholarly work about preschoolers—not a choice you would typically think of for a 17-year-old.

Jasmine’s positive reaction to her book demonstrates the successful role choice played in this project and in connecting to a text. Students could choose any book related to their chosen passion except “how-to” books. These young men and women chose from a range of genres and extended their learning, digging into what they cared about and discovering the roles books can play beyond the school walls.

Paul chose a book of poetry. He confided that though he loved to write poetry, he hadn’t read much of it before.

My book taught me one specific thing about my passion and that is that there are other ways or topics to write about. Before I read this book, I only wrote about hurtful things or pain I have felt. But now I realize you can write about something that has nothing to do with yourself, like a tree, but when you read it you can bend the words to your own life.

Cory, an aspiring comic book writer and artist, allied himself with the author of his book.

The book I read, *Reinventing Comics* by Scott McCloud [2000] offered me a rich history of the comic industry, where it came from and even where it may be going. Scott McCloud takes you on a visual journey through Comic-dom, showing you how the industry compared to others as it was developing, why it has to achieve art status in the public’s eye, past race and gender issues, and even explains the causes for the recent sales recession. If I am to make a place for myself in this world of power fantasies and sci-fi adventures, McCloud is the man I will have to become acquainted with. He is one of the few that has done well in the in-

dependent industry, and could offer a valuable insight on methods to appeal my work to audiences, while still maintaining the integrity of my visions.

Besides poetry and art books, many students chose fiction that related to their topic. Dave’s passion is for illegal drag racing. He chose the novel *Three-in-One Car* (Sankey, 1967) and wrote this:

In many ways, my book was different from my topic because I couldn’t find a book on the drags. But if I had to pick some part of the book that was similar, it would have to be the struggle faced when he was putting his car together. It showed the way he had to work all the time for the parts, but he worked so much that he had to have his friends Biff and Carl help him out.

From the starting of the book, I became drawn to Gary because he has gone through the same struggle that I have when I got my first car. If I went to a coffee shop with him, some of the questions I would ask him would be: What kept you interested in your car? What was the hardest part about fixing your car? And what is one of your best memories you have with your car?

Several of the students chose biographies or autobiographies, a newly discovered genre for them. Cecilia—who is legally blind and losing the little eyesight she has—read *The Miracle Worker* (Gibson, 1984, reissue) about the life of Helen Keller. Dhyana—who chose to study her native land of Tibet—read a book on the life of the Dalai Lama, and Nate—a fanatical skateboarder—read the autobiography of Tony Hawk.

The reading selection by students greatly expands and individualizes choices. Students learned how to find books to connect to their personal passion. We hope this process will encourage them to seek out books of interest in years to come. Nate, for example, was amazed that a biography of his skating hero existed. Students learned that friends, coworkers, bookstore owners, and public librarians can recommend enjoyable and challenging books to which they can personally connect. Jessie continued to be a resource in the classroom, offering suggestions,

giving time to read and write, providing feedback, and showing interest in the students' work. She was particularly supportive of and reinforced all students' efforts to take their learning beyond the classroom walls.

Real-world resources

Real-world resources were explored through interviews. Students were asked to interview an expert in their chosen passion. They participated in a writing workshop and learned how to question, transcribe, and finally write an article based on an interview. Like the book choice, the interviews helped connect the students to adults in the community who can continue as mentors and guides beyond school. These teenagers were intrigued to learn that adults were actually interested in sharing their knowledge and experiences, and they forged new and positive relationships. For example, Cory described his state of mind as he prepared to interview a man he "hardly knew."

May 6, 01 11:27 pm

The coffee was brewing and the interview questions were printing in the computer room. Steve was on his way to the apartment from his friend's house. Everything felt a little hurried. I had just stepped in from my Wing-Chun class and within 10 minutes was preparing to interview a man I hardly knew. I wasn't really nervous; I simply wasn't sure what to expect. No worries, though. Steve acted as the supplier for my comic book fix. He was a nice enough guy and has more than once offered to show me how to work PhotoShop on my computer.

Ron, a budding martial arts student, interviewed his instructor; Blake chose a musician who is a member of a local band he admires; and Chrissie reconnected with her middle school volleyball coach. These young people discovered local mentors. Several students chose to interview members of their families. Cecilia interviewed her grandfather when he was visiting from Guatemala. Like her, he has a genetic condition that caused him to lose his vision. In her interview reflection she wrote,

This weekend I learned more about my grandfather than I ever thought possible. He has accomplished so much and done so many things. Currently, he even has a radio show in Guatemala called "Planting Hope" dedicated to helping people with disabilities. My grandfather is the best man I have ever met and he has taught me so much about life and hard work.

Dhyana gained new insights on her father's life as he told her about fleeing Tibet. She reflected that it was upsetting for him to relive some of his past with her, but it drew them closer. In her interview lead, she wrote,

Today I had the honor of sitting with Topgyal and talk to him as I am interviewing him on "Tibet" and just sitting with him in the room and asking him questions was like being in the presence of both grace and loyalty. That Topgyal survived was a testament to the power of the Tibetan spirit to overcome anything.

Students learned more about their families and communities and often gained new respect for and insights on their culture and roots. We were impressed by the intelligence, the depth, and good-heartedness of these adolescents. We hope that other adults in the students' lives had a chance to learn more about the students as well.

Making connections between teaching and learning

All year, Jessie shared her writing life and her reading life. She was a mentor and model to her students. She wrote with the class and shared her drafts. She also polished pieces and sent them off for publication, letting the students in on her writing, revision, the publication process and "the writing life." Ruth found an intriguing pattern in rereading her field notes for the year. Jessie did something more; she also shared her teaching life. For example, before the class wrote one day, Jessie talked about the planning she and her colleague, Deanna, had done. They had met in a café, tried doing the writing assignment, and talked about the ways they would frame the lesson for their

students. Jessie said to the class, "When Deanna and I started writing, we started thinking about how we should go about it. So, we asked ourselves questions, and we thought these questions might be helpful to share with you." Another day, she talked about going to a local bookstore to look for examples of excellent essays and about sitting on the floor in the aisle thinking of how the students would respond to these words. Later in the year, she told them about calling her former professor and talking to him about trying out different writing strategies with her classes. Jessie's students knew that her teaching life, like her writing life, extended beyond the walls of the classroom.

For the culmination of the passion project, each student had 25 minutes to teach the class about his or her passion. This was a time when Jessie stepped aside and students took over the class. This proved to be an important aspect of the project. As Evan reflected in his final letter to Jessie,

You were more like a source than a teacher. Instead of telling us "how," we came to you when we had questions or needed direction. I felt your role was appropriate in light of our senior year. Now that we're socially expected to be more independent and rely on our own intuition, it seems fitting that this project required these traits. It was a dose of reality for all of us in our academic lives.

Students first guided classmembers through a structured lesson on some aspect of their passion. They then provided an activity so the entire class could get an experiential taste of that particular passion. We found they created lessons and activities that closely mirrored Jessie's teaching.

Leah, the animal lover we described earlier, brought in a guest speaker for her class presentation. She learned the coordination that was important for such an event, and that's reflected in her detailed lesson plan; it included sections on equipment she needed, information on her guest speaker, and a break-out of her use of time called "Play by Play." For his project of choice, Blake made two tapes on a four-track recorder to enter

in a song-writing contest. His lesson plan, though brief, described the thoughtful work he planned with the class, and included copies of the two handouts he created.

I made copies of blank tablature sheets. Tablature is a way of reading music for guitars. I will pass these out with an example of a song on them. I will teach the students how to read tab and play it on guitar. I will also bring in my guitar and show all the parts of the guitar. I will play the examples and possibly an example the students write. I will also let them play my guitar if they want.

The class Blake taught was a wild success, as you can see from this excerpt from Jessie's feedback.

Blake, I love how you provided a diagram to teach the parts of a guitar. I also love how you brought in your guitar to use and teach. I like the pink strap. You are a natural teacher. I can tell there is a whole lingo and discourse that goes along with being a musician. You are an incredible guitarist. I loved how you had Josh come give it a try. You gave terrific positive reinforcement.

The opportunity to serve as an expert teacher was the highlight of the project. As students took on the role of teacher, a community of trust, support, and respect grew among the class members.

There are myriad stories behind these students and their projects. Jake, for example, is a "special needs" student, and Jessie had fought to keep him in her class. Through this project, we learned about his knowledge of bikes and bike repair. He planned and taught a complex lesson on how to change tires and gears on a mountain bike. The entire class was involved and forged a newfound respect for Jake's capabilities—and his passion.

Time

The teaching the students did at the end of the project took up the last three weeks of the year, with two lessons per day, and that was just one component of the work. Carving out the time in

a packed curriculum to devote to students' genuine needs was crucial. Jessie was able to take this time because she is committed to teaching how writing and reading are fundamental tools that need to be attached to what students care about most in the world. Her belief is that the more students can successfully experience how literacy connects to their interests, the more they will participate in their communities. Students read and wrote daily in different genres. They revised, edited, and published narrative and expository essays about their reading. They created visual displays, shared oral presentations, learned to be thoughtful and engaged audience members, and learned the complexities of teaching a class.

Jessie built on work that she had laid a foundation for all year. She continued to follow up on minilessons with ideas such as writing for detail and including the senses. She also taught new minilessons as they were needed, such as writing interview questions, setting up interview times, or making lesson plans. Classroom time was time to write and read, to plan and confer. Jessie provided feedback along the way, not just dumping a big project on her students and telling them it was due in two months. The learning was enhanced by the built-in reflection at every stage of the process. Students were asked weekly for updates on where they were in the project, what they planned to do next, and ways that Jessie could be of help. For each assignment, reflections on the process were as important as the finished product. A few examples from Zerina's portfolio give a taste of the reflection built into the project along the way.

Her first reflection helped Zerina focus on the different aspects of the project as a whole. She wrote that she had a book but planned to go to a bookstore and look for another one. She made a decision about interviewing her mom. She planned to make a poster for the visual display, and she planned her work time.

Hopefully, I'll keep up with the writing pieces in class. This project involves many different things and I'm

gonna have to plan ahead of what I'm gonna do first, second, and so on. I think the explanation for each piece in the project is a good idea.

Zerina eventually decided to interview her sister rather than her mother, and she learned a lot about interviewing—and her sister—from the experience. In her interview reflection she wrote,

My impressions of this interview experience were far beyond my expectations. I was so scared and almost flipped out, because I have no idea how to start the interview, what questions to ask, how to organize the whole thing, and many other concerns. Through this person, I learned more about her passions and childhood.

For her "art project design," Zerina started out by writing "I have no idea what to do for an art project. It's not easy to find something that reveals about Yugoslavia. I'm deciding if I should use pictures when I was little." By the time she wrote her artist's reflection, it was clear she had chosen the right direction for her work:

Well, it wasn't easy gathering such old pictures from Bosnia. I had to write a letter to my grandmother in Serbia and ask her to send me some pictures. She had a hard time doing this, because all of our pictures were in our house in Bratunac. The only problem there was that my grandmother lived in a different city and had to travel to get these pictures that are in the album. Without these pictures, I wouldn't know what to do. Big thanks for Grandma.

We discovered that students like Zerina realized how their reflection writing could actually help in making decisions. Zerina saw how writing could be a tool for her thinking, as this reflection shows.

I really don't have any idea what to do for the project of choice plan. I don't see anything out there relating with Bosnia and the war. This is giving me a really hard time. Actually, you just gave me an idea. Interview someone who went through similar things like me or worse. Who knows, maybe there is someone out there that went through lots more than me. The problem only is that I don't know who would be

willing to share their passion with mine. Can't wait to start on this project. Hey, I just got an idea. I think the perfect person to interview would be my aunt in Australia....

She followed through with a second interview, this time of her aunt, through a long-distance phone call. Zerina's reflection examples are typical of the kinds of metacognitive writing the students did as a regular part of their work. These samples of her reflections show how vital taking the time for this proved to be.

The students also needed feedback on their work along the way. Each of the major assignments included in their final portfolio received a written response and a grade. These planned "check-ins" made the final portfolio easier for the students to put together and set high standards for their work. Despite the realities of classroom teaching, with late papers, unexpected school assemblies, and end-of-the-year paperwork, the passion project reached a successful conclusion: The majority of the students excelled, absences and "tardies" were virtually nonexistent, and all the students passed their final term of high school English.

Blake's words, taken from his final self-evaluation of the project, show the continuing impact his last weeks of senior year have had.

The Passion Project gave us a chance to pick something we really love and dive into it in depth. We all learned something new about our passions and we all learned something about everyone else's passion. This project gave us a window into everyone in our class's mind and what they love. One of my favorite presentations was Paul's. I really liked writing poetry and coloring. It gave me a chance to get some feelings out. I never knew what a therapeutic experience coloring about your feelings could be.

I think you should continue this project in years to come. I would only change one thing about this proj-

ect. I think we should come back to school a couple years later and tell how our passions are still in our lives and if they are stronger or weaker. We should also write a prediction for the future.

Blake's hope is that the cycle will continue. Just as Jessie has worked to help them make a transition to reading, writing, and exploring what they are drawn to beyond the walls of the classroom, these young adults are eager to serve as mentors for the students following in their footsteps. This spring, we hope to hear from Blake, Cory, Dhyana, Cecilia, and the other graduates as they join us with this year's seniors in a new round of "diving into" a passion for learning. This time, they'll be part of the mentoring process, guiding adolescent writers to literate lives.

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