

The Montana Heritage Project in the Classroom

Teacher Jeff Gruber on teaching with this community-based local history model

Q. How would an educator go about starting a project like this?

A. For others starting up a program like this, I would say they should:

- Find interested teachers. Don't start something like this unless they are truly interested.
- Explain the ALERT [Ask, Listen, Explore, Reflect, Transform (or Tell)] model to the teachers and the administrators.
- Develop a network of resources. Call your state or local historical society, town museum, etc.
- If you are going to need equipment, identify that up front and find room in the budget. Remember that if your project will need, say, a digital camera, every kid doesn't need one. One or two is fine.
- Make an agreement with the administration. This is not like the usual class, where the kids are locked up safe and sound inside the school walls for 90 minutes. They will need to be outside, calling people, visiting museums, and interviewing.

Q. What are some common problems that occur in the first year teaching the project? How do you avoid them?

A. The first year of the program is difficult because it is very different from "normal" classes. I'd say my advice for making it go more smoothly is:

- Don't be too ambitious.
- Emphasize the essential question and come back to it often. Make sure students understand it.
- Think out your plan — try to anticipate problems. Sources, for instance. You'll want to have an idea of where kids can go.

- You should also call people you think could be sources. It's a courtesy, but it's also because you'll want to tell them how they can help in terms of answers and because not every one is used to being involved with kids. Some, especially older people, might be intimidated if they think their work will be used on the Internet. They might not understand what the project is about.

Q. How do you structure the class over the school year?

A. The whole class is focused on the ALERT model, not the project per se. The timeline of the class is dependent on the ALERT model, too. But generally:

- The first semester, I teach the basic skills of interviewing, finding information, and sorting out what's important. I'll send students to the county clerk's office and have them find out about their house, for instance. We use local history books and see where information conflicts.
- In the second semester, students formulate their essential question and address that. We figure out where their interests lie and work from there. It's helpful here to know the caliber of your kids. Each class is different. If you have all levels of kids, the class can be hard to regulate. Have students keep a daily journal, writing where they plan to go each day and what they expect to find there, and how it relates to their question. This journal should be approved before they leave the classroom.
- [The above referred to] the Ask and Listen stages. In the Explore stage, students will look for additional information in sources like microfilm and magazines, old advertisements, etc. The Explore stage is about adding context.
- When you reach the Reflect stage, it's very important to talk it over with your students. The typical high school kid will skip right past this to the "Tell" part. But the class is not about the project. It's about developing the process of learning, and the Reflect stage is the most important part.

More on the Tell stage – and other helpful ALERT material – is available at www.edheritage.org/tools/alert.htm