Genius Hour in the Library

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WHAT IS GENIUS HOUR?

Genius Hour, 20% Time, and Passion Projects (Kerr, 2015; Kessler, 2015) are all names for a movement in education that allows students to spend time in school exploring, researching, and studying any topic of their choice. Google is credited with the concept: employees are given time during office hours to work on any project about which they are passionate. Employee creativity and productivity increases, and, in turn, many innovative Google products have resulted from "free time" on company time.

When I learned that classroom teachers across the nation are adopting this practice, my thought was, "I'm a librarian—I should do this, too. I have the power to make research exciting for multiple classes because I teach everyone!" I searched the web for guidance on librarian-led Genius Hour and found plenty of how-to for classroom teachers. But from a library perspective, there was minimal information, and it focused on how the librarian might support the teacher. So, not to be dissuaded from my mission, I began to formulate an approach from the library point of view.

MORE FUEL FOR THE FIRE

I read at least one book on education every summer for inspiration for the next academic year. Last summer, the book *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns* (Christensen, Horn, and Johnson, 2008) did more than just inspire. It created urgency in me to make clear and significant changes in the way I present library curriculum. The content of this book led me to conclude that the library, or learning commons, is the place to help students prepare for their future. If we begin in elementary school, such skills as critical thinking, creativity, problem solving, and an intrinsic love of learning can be nurtured at a young age. A learning commons provides sanctuary from the rigors of curriculum, and it is fertile ground for growing natural curiosity in students as they explore their own interests, gifts, and talents. Problem solving is a skill that better equips a person to learn and be successful in school, careers, life, and, yes, standardized tests. It made perfect sense to me: the learning commons is the starting place, and Genius Hour is the journey students will take to reach personal, meaningful, educational destinations. Genius Hour is, intrinsically, exactly what they *want* to learn. And the twenty-first-century librarian's function in the learning commons is to provide guidance and support.

HONESTY AND SELFISH MOTIVATIONS

I admit to you and the world, I've never been accused of being purely altruistic, but I am known for being honest. Not only do I want my students to succeed, but I also want to make sure that a library in my charge is on the leading edge, that I'm a relevant educator, and that I'm involved in significant trends. I also need to be honest about the fact that the nature of Genius Hour means that much of your time will be spent learning, adjusting, and responding to whatever your students bring to the table. It also means many unpredictable surprises—most of them are thrilling and amazing, while others are not so pleasant. But as librarians, we expect the unexpected.

398.2 LESSONS

With my summer of research in my back pocket and a fire in my soul about the direction I wanted to take with my library program, I made an appointment with my principal to present my case for implementing Genius Hour on our campus.

As with all fairy godmothers and genies, when you're granted wishes, they come with stipulations and consequences. Administrator support is only the beginning. It's imperative that faculty also support this

Year 1 Quick Details

- Every class comes to the library weekly for forty-five-minute Genius Hour sessions.
  - Sessions include a ten-minute minilesson, checkout, and time to engage in the project.
  - Teachers accompany the class. (Their role is to assist struggling students, alongside my mentoring.)
  - Teachers may send students to the library to work on projects during flex time (about one-fourth of the typical day).
  - Students are also allowed to work on their projects in the classroom when they have completed assigned work.
  - Our school has 500 children and 29 teachers who use fixed time.
  - I create lesson plans for month-long intervals, beginning with general concepts and curriculum standards. I document details of how I respond to students. Unlike traditional lesson plans, the goal is to be responsive, not didactic. I cleared this with my principal first.

- I discourage group projects for the sake of simplicity. This year, I would consider group projects if students had a substantial amount of shared background or experience.
- Tackling one project yearly is plenty of challenge. I am committed to providing a respite from stress that students experience from covering so much information in a day.
- If a project makes a logical progression to a new or modified idea, I let it happen. That is part of the process, too.

project, at least in principle. And it was a daunting task to ask a standardized-test weary, scope-and-sequence burdened faculty to give up a part of their day for the sake of a year-long library-driven project. Since it was *my* goal to personally lead all of my third- through fifth-grade classes through Genius Hour, I had to do it in a way that didn't interfere with the faculty's preference for regularly scheduled, forty-five-minute library sessions. So all I asked classroom teachers for was their support in coteaching—by assisting during library time. Any additional time would be limited to help when difficult-to-reach parents needed to be contacted and with grading of the projects at the end. By clearly stating that this is my responsibility, and that the students and teachers would receive all the benefit, it was next to impossible to say no. Plus, I had the strong support of two teachers who had been introduced to the concept of Genius Hour during their summer professional development. They were my greatest supporters.

In every journey through an unknown forest, one finds trolls, wolves, or other beasts along the way. But if you are clever, steadfast, and true, you will be able to transform, or at least appease, the beasts when they discover that your intentions are noble. Enough said about naysayers.

Magical creatures will help you along the way. Good parents will spread the word when they see how their children are thriving. Good teachers will support you wholeheartedly by taking on more of the responsibilities when they see how much curriculum you are covering and how well it is integrated. Good administrators will grant you knighthood because you have brought peace to the kingdom . . . or something like that.

I'M READY! NOW WHAT?

I won't say, "This is the way," or "This is exactly what to do," but I will say that this is what I did. Some of it worked exceptionally well, and some of it could have been better. I've already made adjustments for the upcoming school year and will probably adjust again, so the point is that your best approach would be to remain flexible and responsive and to trust your instincts. Before you introduce Genius Hour to your students, there is some preliminary work to do.

BUILD A FOUNDATION

I think it is important to first establish an environment that facilitates independent research and learning. I did this with learning commons concepts. I designated space in my library that included

- *Tinkering lab or makerspace.* The makerspace movement is a whole other topic of discussion. In my opinion, *makerspace* implies multistep projects, so I prefer to refer to my designated space as a tinkering lab, where there are simple projects and activities to help kids think outside the box. Its purpose is to get them accustomed to questioning and problem solving and to learn how to "behave" when moving about.
- *Supply station.* Provide access to am-

ple notebook paper, pencils, sticky notes, tape, scissors, staplers, shelf markers, pencil sharpeners, and anything else deemed necessary to gather, store, and manipulate information.

• *Varied seating arrangements.* Various seating includes tables and chairs, bean bags and gaming chairs, floor space for lounging, and a sofa or two. All of this helps provide comfortable space to suit the preferences of the learner.

I also established an understanding with the students. I state repeatedly, and in no uncertain terms, that I can neither think for them nor do everything for them. It is imperative that they become responsible for solving their own problems, getting their own work done, and helping each other whenever they can. Collaborative efforts are encouraged as long as they are positively synergistic. Kids are in school to learn many things, including independence and teamwork.

Now that your environment is established, it's time to get started!

IMPLEMENTING GENIUS HOUR

The first year is an unknown for all involved, so it's a good idea for both you and your students, as you proceed through each skill and engage in research, to constantly monitor and evaluate your progress and decide if what you are doing is successful. Ask yourself, "Is this working?" "What is the next logical step?" "Am I communicating my expectations without forcing the direction of the child's thought processes or creativity?" "Is everyone engaged in their activity?" Gently steer things in the right direction without being a commanding force, and don't be afraid to say, "I made a mistake. Let's try again."

Your students may ask, "This topic is boring—do I have to do it all year?" "Can I join a buddy with a better topic?" "What if I fail?" Guide your students in crisis. A bad topic choice can be changed early on, but when it goes too far into the year, a change in the direction of the research or adding a more complex question to the topic can make it better. Students experiencing topic envy may want to join that

buddy. I tried to discourage this, because the students may not always have time to work together on a group project, and they tend to become a distraction to others around them. However, if there is genuine shared interest in a topic or activity, maybe working on different aspects of the same topic would make it possible to share the interest without diminishing the value of individual research.

Finally, the question of failure comes up. "What if my big, daring project goes wrong?" My answer is, "Great! You took a big chance, and it didn't go as you expected. We all learn far, far more from our failures than from our successes. Tell us why you think it went wrong, and if you had time to do it again, what would you do differently?" I have far more respect for a risktaken failure than a safe success.

HERE WE GO!

1. Make a presentation to help students begin thinking of ideas or topics. Show students how living leads to research—buying a new technology, traveling, experiencing a weather phenomenon, hobbies or sports—especially when it impacts their lives in a personal way. The possibilities are limitless. Immediately after the presentation, it is a good idea to have students journal about any ideas or topics they want to learn more about so they don't forget.

2. Have students submit a topic through an emailed digital parent/student survey. There are two reasons for this: First, keeping it all digital eliminates paperwork, keeps it stored in one location, and accumulates responses in a spreadsheet that can then be sorted by student name, grade, teacher, or topic—whatever is needed throughout the year. Second, parent participation in the survey minimizes the risk that a child is researching a topic that is contrary to the family's beliefs or values.

3. You will be utilizing websites, videos, and databases later on, but make sure you have at least one book source for each topic to begin. Students just seem to understand books better than any

other source, but you also have to consider your budget and how many times in the future that book will be used, especially if it is an unusual or high-level topic. I used the survey to check against my holdings and added this tool to my collection development plan. Most topics were predictable and already on the shelves; others pointed out gaps in the collection that needed to be filled, and there were a few highly unusual topics that were welcome additions. Some topics were definitely beyond the scope of an elementary school library. You decide how to address this. I knew the students would borrow and hold onto the books for a long time, probably too long for an interlibrary loan. So I chose to make a purchase. It was important to me that each child have one actual, hard copy with which to work.

4. I used the scientific method as the preferred research process. Students need to have a plan for how their research will be conducted. After introducing this early, revisit the research process, so they can see the steps and not just blindly follow your lead. I know there are library research models, but the scientific method is universally accepted across disciplines and reinforces science curriculum. Library is a part of the world, and I don't want to create the perception that it exists in its own bubble.

5. Teach skills in any order that you see fit. This is what worked for me:
A. *Dictionary and encyclopedia (bound or digital).* Students need to spell their topic correctly, have a working definition of the subject, and discover quickly whether this is a good topic for research. It needs to have enough complexity so that the research question is not answered with a single dictionary definition. If you know the topic is not good for research, the student will have discovered, for themselves, evidence that you need to persuade them to find a more complex topic. Finding out this way is far more powerful than telling them no.
B. *Mapping.* Creating a map of the

school library is a way to facilitate location of nonfiction resources, introduce the Dewey Decimal system, and establish that fiction books are a joy to read but probably won't help with research.

C. *Library catalog.* The catalog search for books reveals new angles on information other than the obvious. This helps students come up with an unexpected approach to a simple topic and therefore makes the research more interesting for the long term. The reward at the end is at least one tangible resource.

D. *Databases.* School databases are safe, grade-level appropriate sources of information. City public library databases potentially can provide a free source for more advanced topics. Databases are also abstract, therefore forgotten when free web searches begin. In many ways "Googling it" is easier to do but puts the burden on the user to evaluate the source. I addressed this when we moved to free web search.

E. *Web searches.* There are many safe search engines, but ranting won't stop Google searches from happening, so go with the flow. What I emphasize at this point is that Google is not a source to cite. For some reason, after covering citation of sources, Google is now a source. I explain that search engines are like our school library, but instead of holding books, they hold websites and other digital materials.

F. *Evaluating web sources.* Again, this yields more difficulties for young people; however, the Internet forces this topic upon us. Since web domain extensions are hardly a clear indication as to the reliability of the source, my lesson is to look at the page, look for the author, and determine the author's purpose. Furthermore, Wikipedia, while exceptionally informative, is not an acceptable source for citations in academic research or at the professional level, so why not teach this now? I tell my students that Wiki is a great starting point, but it is best to find other sources after that. And, by the way, we have databases! I had created my own

database of reliable sources based on my students' topic choices, but it was a lot of work for one lesson. I intended for the students to rely on my database, but they continually returned to Google searches. Again, go with the flow.

G. *Note taking and citation of sources.* This is a two-step process, but the steps go hand in hand, and each is tough to grasp. Taking notes should start from the beginning, as it requires lots of practice. Creating citations will need to be revisited and refined as you get closer to presenting, but it starts as a lesson that emphasizes that stealing (even ideas, thoughts, or words) is wrong. We used EasyBib.com for web sources and the EasyBib app for books with barcoded ISBNs. *Encyclopedia Britannica* has citations in their articles: just copy and paste. Still, notes and citations remained the greatest struggle of this entire process, and the critics say it is too much for elementary school students. But I believe that *somebody* has to start providing practice in note taking and planting the seeds of ethics. It might as well be me.

KEEPING YOURSELF ORGANIZED

Because you are working with multiple grade levels, multiple classes, and possibly hundreds of topics, it seems this undertaking has the potential to blow up quite spectacularly, and it could. However, organization helps to keep things under control.

• Create a flexible time line on a bulletin board or wall. When you cover a skill, post the date you began. Leave the skills to be covered visible, but movable, so you can respond to your classes. Do the same on your library web page for parents to access from home. This keeps you on track and everyone informed on what's been covered and what comes next.

• Adopt the Navy SEALS Warrior Code for your library life: leave no classes or children behind! Do everything in your power to keep all classes on the same lesson and children caught up with work. Put the brakes on fast-moving classes with en-

richment while working to get slower ones up to pace. This will save you from the agony and confusion of trying to remember where each class is in the process. If you have students whose parents don't respond to surveys or emails, ask the teacher to step in or intervene yourself. A concerned phone call or conference with the librarian goes a long, long way.

• If you are going low tech, I strongly advise that you keep all graphic organizers, folders, and student work in your custody. If the work leaves the room, consider it gone forever, and realize now that students will be re-creating a school year's worth of work in the end. If you have digital storage for your students in your school, keep it all in a folder or a drive so lost work will be less of an issue. Our students now have Google accounts. They can keep everything in their drive and access it wherever they have Internet access.

TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATION

I think all of this can be done in a low-tech way, but it may take a little more effort, or just omit what you don't have. But desktop or laptop computers and personal devices definitely enhance the process. At a minimum, you need Internet access to integrate technology into your projects, and some technologies are better than others for various tasks. Ultimately, the majority of students preferred desktop computers when it came to work time. Personal devices were good for browsing websites, using apps for small tasks, and getting the disinterested students curious.

THE BIG EVENT OR HOW TO PRESENT

Telling a child to "present any way you feel comfortable presenting" doesn't make sense to the "childoftherubric." Students are accustomed to being told *exactly* what to do, so it was difficult to get them to comprehend that it was okay to do literally "whatever it takes to communicate to the audience about your topic." Demonstrations, recitals, portfolios, art shows, samples, homemade movies, web pages, essays,

and plays are all extraordinary examples of the culmination of a year-long study. I went against my instinct—at the urging of some worried teachers—by modeling a slideshow, a presentation board, and a website. There is nothing worse than seeing child after child read PowerPoint slides and posterboards. The good news is that I had enough students who were able to think outside the box. The "box thinkers" were then inspired by the others' presentations. This year, I plan to use a multiple intelligences selfassessment quiz from Edutopia.com. I believe it will be helpful for students to find a way to present that is most comfortable for them.

As for the format of the presentations, each class presented to their peers in the library. Unfortunately, we ran out of time, and the presentations that couldn't be done in the library were carried over into the classrooms. I've envisioned a big Genius Hour Fair for parents and students to participate, perhaps as part of a PTA event, but to plan that for the first year felt just a little too risky, since I didn't know what would result. But, feeling great with the results, I did have a Best of Genius Hour fair for my second graders: I selected students who did a great job of being creative and presented in varying ways to give the second graders an idea of what they would be working toward in third grade. I suspect that as more teachers and parents get on board with Genius Hour, the schoolwide fair may become a reality.

FAVORITE PROJECTS AND REFLECTIONS

Some of the more memorable and representative topics that my students had researched include
- being a foster sister
- convincing mom that we should get a dog
- kid-friendly Las Vegas—touring Vegas with Grandma before Mom's wedding
- paper airplane design and paper—which flies best?
- science of football
- Krampus: folklore of the German antiSanta

- I lived in tornado alley
- how to create stop-motion animation
- studying the art of Leonardo da Vinci

These topics were all personal to the presenters, and their methods of presentation made sense. There were posters, slideshows, videos, samples, demonstrations, storytelling, instruction, and art shows.

Not all projects were spectacular, heartfelt, and creative. At a minimum, they met requirements, and everyone had a chance to communicate in front of their peers. I realize, in retrospect, that my students almost precisely fit into a standard bell curve when it came to adapting to the new concept. What was surprising (and not, when you think about it) was who the early adopters were: the GT and special-needs students. Both groups were uninhibited and soared at their own level. At the standard middle of the bell were regular ed students who faithfully adhered to meeting the requirements, no more, no less. These students were, however, inspired by early adopters' presentations and then immediately began to plan for next year's project. The back end of the curve students weren't discovered until the bitter end. I was shocked to see that a handful of students, who appeared to be working diligently all along, had nothing to show for a year's worth of research. It stands to reason that if they need help all day, all over campus, the library is no different. Enlist the help of teachers to assist these students throughout the year so they are not left silently struggling.

HAPPILY EVER AFTER

As I begin this academic year, I attended collaboration meetings with the teachers and expressed my intention to continue Genius Hour this year. The response was overwhelmingly positive. The consensus was that Genius Hour is both a motivator and a reward. It is an exciting activity to work toward after seat work is completed, it creates an increased sense of awareness of the world, and it presents opportunities to problem solve. One teacher commented, "We all learned so much!" I strongly suspect that the second year bell curve will look significantly different; having gone

through the process, most students are thinking more creatively now and are able to begin with the end in mind. I will spend less time worrying about how Genius Hour is going to turn out and spend more time[Q: something missing?] By approaching each day with the mindset, "Nobody knows everything, but with some time, we can figure it out together," I fostered an atmosphere of collegiality between my students and myself, which has enabled students to enthusiastically plan for the next time. It sure does look like they have developed an intrinsic love of learning. Mission accomplished!

If you decide to begin a Genius Hour on your campus and you are new to librarianship, it will be a fantastic beginning. If you have been a librarian for many years, I will tell you that the support, evidence, and necessity for implementing your Genius Hour are here. Be ready for the most exciting year of your career. Be current, be leading edge, be ready to learn—it is a genius idea.

RESOURCES

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