

Sample Inquiry Project in Upper Elementary

In the following narrative, teacher Chris Erickson describes one trimester's work in his integrated humanities unit on Ancient History.

Theme for the year: Rise and Fall, Then and Now

Theme for 2nd trimester: The Birth of Reason

The kids know that all the background knowledge we get through our research on ancient Greece is to inform the production of our original play. First, we generate and categorize questions that the students have about Ancient Greece. Then, the kids choose which research team they want to be a part of and research the answers to these questions using a variety of materials provided by the teacher. These materials include books on ancient Greece as well as Internet resources. More often than not, the background knowledge specified in the state standards is covered through this method. Examples of questions from this trimester are:

"What was Greek clothing made out of?"

"What are some Greek military strategies?"

"Was Aristotle in government?"

"Did the Greeks have kings and queens?"

If not all info in the standards are covered, the teacher is careful to offer questions of his own to fill in the holes. From here we convene and review the answers to all of our questions, and these questions form the basis of our end of unit quiz. In effect, the kids are writing their own tests.

Each step of the way, students are reminded to study the information not only as historical researchers, but also as playwrights and dramatists. This kind of academic inquiry is supported by hands-on projects of relevance such as building three dimensional Greek columns, constructing Greek style theater masks, and painting frescoes. These projects adorn the walls and ceiling of our room to create an immersive environment as we study.

Our language arts curriculum supports this line of inquiry by exposing the kids to elements of Aristotle's *Poetics*, the world's first known work of literary criticism. We not only want the students to create an original play with accurate historical information, we also want them to include the specific characteristics which have made Greek drama, epic poetry, and mythology timeless. Examples of this would be including cunning heroes, dramatic revelations, reversal of fortunes, and issues of fate. We also explore Aristotle's methods of rhetoric and reason early in the trimester through drafting persuasive essays.

By this time in the trimester, the students are ready to begin work on their original play, having gained sufficient background information to write a creative and historically accurate work. The first step for them is to write a very short, one or two-page play individually, which gives them a chance to explore how to structure a play, how to write dialogue, and how to write stage direction. Work can then begin on our culminating project for the trimester— our collaborative, Greek-style, one-act play, to be performed for fellow students, families, and the general public.

The plot or content of the play may be derived from one of the student's very short plays or maybe something completely original written collaboratively by the class. For the production, students choose to participate primarily as actors (mentored by Da Vinci middle school drama students), some as prop and costume experts, some as musicians, and some in a more directorial role. Once

the production is complete, post-assessments and student reflections along with photographs, copies of the plays, and other memorabilia are collected for inclusion in each individual student's portfolio.