**Observation One**

Thursday, February 2, 2011 from 10:15am to 12:30pm

**The Scene**

This observation was held at a 9-12 high school in the metropolitan Washington, DC area with 1650 students and 119 professional staff, including the sole librarian. The school population is majority Hispanic (41.8%) and Black (38.8%). 44.7% of students receive Free and Reduced Meals.

**The Assignment**

Seventy-two 11th and 12th grade students from one Chemistry class, one Biology I class, and one Biology II class were assigned a research project focused on plastic bags. A recent tax has been instituted locally requiring stores to charge five cents for every bag. Students were tasked with coming up with their own group research topic under this focus. Student groups were self-created, with the one direction that each group must include at least one student from each class.

It was explained to students that this was research as opposed to a science experiment. The research had to be based on fact and data, rather than theory. The final research will be presented to the community, including officials from major grocery chains and state legislators on February 24, 2012.

Students were given two working lunch hours to decide on groups, topics, and a research plan. Students are required to include teachers on all email and Facebook group communications. Students were also given one full “field-trip” day use of the media center to conduct research. After that, the project will be completed on their own time.

**The Observed Lesson**

I was able to observe over two hours of the “field-trip” day in the media center. When I arrived, all students were engaged in the research process. I was able to speak with both the biology and chemistry teacher about the lesson plan and the process. Both teachers were clear that the grade for this project was on the collaborative research process rather than the product, and that the objective for staff was to create an authentic research experience for the students that will help in their future careers, both academic and occupation. This is one of the main reasons the students are required to include the teachers on all communications.

I was able to view the large white boards where students had outlined their self-selected groups and their topics: Chemistry of Plastics, The Effects on the Local Environment, The Effects Globally, [How to] Create more Biodegradable Plastics, What is Biodegradable, and How will this tax affect the Future. I was also permitted to walk around and speak with the students. The students were engaged in the inquiry project and highly collaborative with each other. They had self-delegated tasks within their groups of approximately 12-15 students. Students were on research databases, some were filming interviews with adults on their reaction to the new tax (myself included), and some were using Skype to interview adult experts outside the school. Students had scheduled these interviews during their pre-planning. I observed groups using Omni-outliner to sketch out their presentation formats. Groups had plans for combinations of You-Tube published documentaries, PowerPoint and Prezi presentations.

The two teachers and the librarian were present as coaches rather than instructors. The student/teacher and student/librarian interactions observed were reminders of time remaining and where groups should be in the process, answering questions about the lunch order delivery, retrieving new batteries for the video camera, tracking down an administrator that had agreed to an interview, and suggesting a database that would include a specific news agency a student was looking for.

There was not much obvious interaction between the teachers and librarian, yet this made the pre-planning all the more obvious. They circulated the room effectively, students did not have to search far to get their few questions answered, and the staff was able to check in with each group consistently and monitor progress.

**An Interview with the Librarian**

There was pre-planning between the teachers and the librarian: scheduling and discussing the objectives and anticipated outcomes for both staff and students. The teachers designed the assignment and explained the project to students before their media center time, the librarian provisioned for the media center time by having the necessary equipment available, researching the topic herself to create a suggested list of starting databases, and coordinating with administration the temporary closure of the media center for this project. The librarian mentioned they already have a debriefing luncheon scheduled for February 25 to reflect on the project and coordinate their individual lists for upgrades to next year.

Beyond this project, the school librarian moves the instructional relationships in her building from isolation to collaboration by talking with staff. She could not stress enough how important she feels it is to “toot [her] program’s horn, lest they forget about [her].” She has been affected by budget cuts, having recently lost a part-time fully certified librarian as well as a full-time assistant. She purposefully stays on the radar of the admin team and the teaching staff. She attends the Instructional Leadership team meetings to stay in the loop of what is happening in the school and also to have a weekly place to report on her program and keep in touch with the department resource teachers. She has also figured out which resource teachers do not necessarily share and communicate with their departments, so she tries to communicate with those teachers directly, especially when maintaining her collection goals and her lists for purchases.

She encourages use of the library by demonstrating usefulness. This goes back to her desire to have ongoing conversations with staff. She has created information to keep at her fingertips for how to use current research and production technology effectively. She is a master of the tools that she prefers, but also pulls others from a collaborative discussion board maintained by her colleagues in the county. She explains to her students that the county they live in “pays a lot to provide the best of the best in research databases, so use of Google and Wikipedia must be approved” and are to be used for extremely current issues that may not yet appear in database research.

In this high school, the full-class patrons mostly come from the English and Social Studies departments, followed by Foreign Language and ESOL. Once a year, or so, the librarian sees the science classes. The math department she sees not at all. Her stumbling blocks – which she refers to as her competition – is the structure of curriculum, especially in the STEM classes, and the availability of the three other computer labs. Her plan this summer is to read over the physics and math curriculum outlines and see if she can find a way to suggest how they could take the time to utilize the library resources in an authentic way. When asked about why she feels the other computer labs are competition, she expressed that some teachers do not have proper research skills, and using the computer lab on their own moves students backwards.

**My Reflection**

This was a true inquiry project. The current tax being quite recent and relevant to the student’s lives – every store must charge this tax, so if the student shops, they have been impacted. I believe this relevance led to the fact that I could not find one student that was not actively participating in some way to the outcome. I wonder how well this will work in future school years; the staff may have to work hard at finding such relevant topics. The authentic presentation to people that matter to the issue is another factor in keeping students engaged. I appreciate the fact that students are being graded on the process of their research and collaboration in group, the assessment of the product comes in a much more real-world way than a grade on a paper. This project could have been a highlighted example of the article we read on pages 247-252, “Authentic Learning” by Daniel Callison and Annette Lamb (Fontichiaro). There were so many “authentic” aspects: resources used, relevant task, audience for product, teamwork, and achievement.

I think the level of collaboration on the staff’s part was at the highest level, precisely because it was invisible. Collaboration does not need to be a show with two sages on the stage, but may best be used to support student-centered learning. During my observation, the entire process was that of a well-oiled machine. The staff respected each other, could anticipate each other, and had a plan. I did not need to observe staff interacting to know just how much they had and my interview with the librarian confirmed my suspicion; this assignment was planned by bouncing ideas off each other and creating a solid foundation. My local school librarian recommended this librarian to me after a discussion of our assignment. She was one of three recommendations and I am grateful she accepted. Her enthusiasm for her job shone through in all of our discussions and our interview went beyond the bounds of this assignment. She left me with a lot of insight and suggestions regarding librarianship in this particular county.

**Observation Two**

Thursday, February 9, 2011 from 11:46am to 12:58pm

**The Scene**

This observation was held at a 6-8 middle school in the metropolitan Washington, DC area with 760 students and 65 professional staff, including the sole librarian. The school population is majority Hispanic (48.2%) and Black (26.1%). 54.9% of students receive Free and Reduced Meals.

**The Assignment**

National History Day is a department-wide assignment for the social studies department. The observed class consisted of twenty-nine 8th grade students; eleven of these students have an individualized education plan, eight of the students have RELL (recently-exited English language learner) accommodations. They were asked to choose from a pre-selected list of topics to research: Murray vs. University of Maryland (school integration), The Underground Railroad, John Brown, or the Washington Redskins name controversy. Students were given a very structured packet to lead them through the research process.

The packet pre-taught vocabulary and outlined a research process for the student: learn about the theme, brainstorm an initial topic, do initial research, decide if you like your topic (if no, go back to brainstorm), if yes: come up with a thesis statement, research making notecards with facts and sources, create your argument, plan your presentation (can be website, poster, performance, written paper, documentary, exhibit, or PowerPoint), create your presentation.

Students will be assessed on their note cards, evidence chart, thesis statement, and final product. The project will take 6 weeks total, the time spent in the media-center as a class will be two class periods.

**The Observed Lesson**

Students entered the room ten minutes into the class and were seated at tables. The librarian welcomed the class and the teachers. She reminded students that they were there to research. She confirmed her understanding that they had used their packets in the classroom to preview some vocabulary and some history around the available topics, that they had gone through the packets with their teacher to understand the expectations.

The librarian explained that over the next two periods the students would rotate in groups of ten through three stations. Students would have thirty minutes at each station. The teacher was asked to portray “Vanna White” as the librarian directed student’s attention to a computer station, a reference station, and a book station, which she had pulled for them.

The librarian then used the Promethean board to model how students would access the research links set-up for them when they were in the computer station. Students were asked to move to their groups, which had already been assigned.

The three adults (teacher, paraeducator, and librarian) also moved to each station in support. The librarian was at the computer station guiding students through the login process and navigation. The students accessed a page that already had defined links. Students were asked to take notes using the prepared note cards in their packet. All students in this station were on-task.

The paraeducator was sitting with the students that were pulling from the book cart. Students were sitting at the tables reading these books. Students were asked to take notes using the prepared note cards in their packet. The paraeducator was reminding them to keep writing on their note cards and was reading passages to them and explaining what some words meant. Many students in this station were off-task while waiting for help.

The teacher was at the encyclopedia station with students showing them how to look up terms alphabetically. Once they found their article, students were completing the note cards. Two students were off-task while waiting for assistance.

**An Interview with the Librarian**

There was pre-planning between the department and the librarian. This is the fifth year of the project. There seems to be tension between the librarian and the department about the structure of the assignment. The librarian would like students to be able to ask more questions of a topic, while the resource teacher’s vision is to have the students simply get through the 5W questions on a topic. The resource of time seems to be the main stumbling block. There are 27 classes that each need two days minimum in the media center. The librarian feels they simply need more time to do anything resembling authentic inquiry, but the teachers are unwilling and unable due to the curriculum.

Time and the pressures on the building of not making AYP for three years are this school librarian’s largest stumbling blocks to moving the instructional relationship from isolation to collaboration. She attends the Instructional Leadership team meetings to stay in the loop of what is happening in the school. She observes at the monthly meetings that bring in people from central office leading her to understand the demands put in place by central office in the way of data collection. Central office is very prescriptive of what assessments need to happen and be recorded. She feels that leads to an environment of test preparation, and she disagrees with this, feeling that students would actually do better with exploration and critical thinking skills.

She encourages use of the library by finding ways to fit in with the curriculum. Her focus is on collection development and suggesting resources to teachers. She is a listener and often has suggestions. Because class time is such a roadblock, she tries to be very proactive in working with teachers to save time. Before any project she works with teachers to be very clear on what should be pre-taught in the classroom and what should be addressed while in the media center.

As with the high school, the full-class patrons mostly come from the English and Social Studies departments, followed by Foreign Language and ESOL. The math department does use the library to administer a math intervention on the computers, but this is simply a use of the computers and no other library resources beyond that.

**My Reflection**

This was a project very similar to the way I was taught to research in high school, an informative report, no critical thinking necessary. I can vividly remember the relief and excitement I experienced when I encountered my first inquiry-based project in college.

During the observation, everything felt rushed to me, and therefore felt like they were only going through the motions. It appeared to be surface level teaching where nothing gets taught in depth. I teach 50% of these kids myself, I understand the behavioral issues that could lead to this structure, but philosophically I think the structure to control behavior is limiting learning and critical thinking. My suggestions for upgrades would have been to spend time each year to make this more in-depth. Perhaps in the sixth grade year focus solely on the questioning and discovering process, then move onto critical evaluation and synthesizing in 7th grade, and then require a product in the 8th grade year. Another solution to time might be to have two classes in at a time for twice as many days, as there is room and enough resources to make this feasible.

As a teacher, I would be hesitant to do this project at all as it stands. I think it was a great waste of time in relation to the amount of learning. Another upgrade I could see would be to involve another department the previous quarter. English comes to mind because staff could take that time to teach one of the earlier steps, like how to question or use relevant sources. I understand the pressures that led to this situation, and it is sad to see how difficult it is for some to stand back and try to find solutions. It emphasizes the importance of professional development that explores new innovations, rather than getting stuck in the data, even when the outside pressures are so great. Had I been the librarian and felt the brick wall from the department, I think I may have shown them some inquiry models. The chart provided in the article “Steps to Designing Inquiry-Based Units” by Audrey Okemura might have been a quick visual way to outline a planning process without making the department feel too put-upon (School Library Media Activities Monthly). It has demonstrated to me the importance of preparing some templates of what I’d like to see in a student-centered inquiry project in my library, as not all teachers are going to come to me with this knowledge, I will need a way to convince them quickly.