Engagement with Genius Hour

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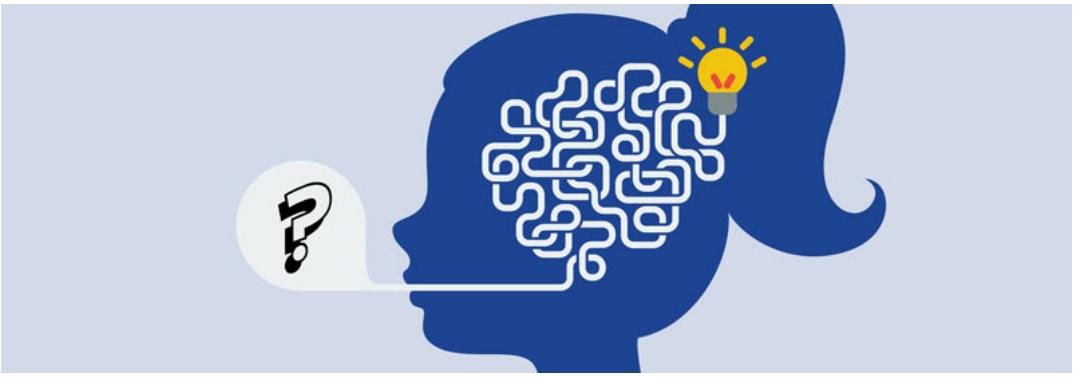

How do you get 70% of students to devote their time to learning voluntarily? Read on.

Research skills, the Holy Grail of information literacy to librarians, are essential. Among the many other abilities we strive to ensure students acquire, this skill set is the one I struggled with the most. Upon introducing a new lesson, the inevitable eye rolls and groans from my students have been strong indicators of the monumental difficulty I faced. Student engagement, excitement, and motivation were lacking, and these were the traits that I wanted to cultivate. My quest became this: how do I empower students to take charge of their learning while properly teaching them the skills needed to succeed outside of school?

Discovering Genius Hour

At the beginning of my career as a librarian, my students were assigned an annual large research project in grades one through four, but in the upper grades (five through eight) this was replaced with numerous small assignments. I implemented a series of small research tasks termed "Mini Sleuth," where students investigated a topic of their choosing during library class and then presented their findings orally during another class. This process consumed three class periods. Students began to ask for more Mini Sleuth activities as they recognized it helped with citing and properly gathering information, public speaking skills, note-taking, and the completion of other class assignments. I was excited that they wanted more, but time was an issue. If students missed one class during Mini Sleuth, due to snow days, field trips, etc., it was too difficult to get them back on track. So I began exploring new educational trends that would assist me in finding something similar to Mini Sleuth. While perusing the internet, I stumbled upon Genius Hour.

I spent several hours one evening reading, watching, and tweeting to gather more information regarding Genius Hour. I ended up spending months investigating, connecting, and discussing the concept with other professionals, and I realized this was what I was looking for—it met all my criteria and emphasized the skills I wanted my students to develop. There are three goals for Genius Hour: Question, Research, and Share. A question must be asked that cannot be answered by a simple Google search. The research encompasses any boundaries set by the mentor. Methods of sharing are left up to the individual. I immediately sat down and began composing my template for a pilot program for grades seven and eight. My criteria were the same as the original program with the additional caveat that Genius Hour would not be a graded course.

This was it! My only obstacle was finding a time to implement the pilot without imposing on core curriculum. I chose the students' lunch and recess time. I jumped through the hoops of approaching the administration, presenting to the school board, discussing at a staff meeting, and nabbing an unsuspecting colleague, Sean Collins, with whom to collaborate. My vision was beginning to come together, and I was excited. I began to share my thoughts with students during class—only divulging enough information to pique their interest.

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Piloting Our Program

In the fall of 2015, we began implementation. Students could come to the first few meetings to discover what Genius Hour involved. Once they filled out a plan of intent, they were obligated to come once a week to work on their project. The results were astonishing. Since this was also during my lunchtime, we decided to open the library up to Genius Hour on Mondays and Tuesdays. Initially, we had about 44 students sign up out of a total enrollment of 62 within the designated grade range. Several decided this was not their cup of tea, and that was fine with us. Many embraced the concept, and within a month, we had students requesting to come on Wednesdays. Thursdays and Fridays soon followed, and Genius Hour was running five days a week. We could not turn away students who were asking to learn during their free time—yes, giving up their free time to learn during school hours! This was what I hoped to accomplish. The projects were as varied as a bag of trail mix. We had students building computers, coding, creating a Minecraft server, studying fashion, languages, the science of emotions, dance, contortions, making clothes, building a ukulele, creating videos, apps, bracelets, writing scripts, stories, poetry, drawing, and creating drives for charities.

The learning curve for mentors and students was comparable to riding a roller coaster. As mentors, we learned to give up control. Students encountered problems, and we needed to coach and guide them to answers, not simply supply them. We knew that failure was a real component of the process. I created a "Fantastic Failure" reflection sheet that encouraged students to examine where the project went astray and what they could do to revive it or to let it go. (See "Use This Page.") This was a freedom rarely given to them. We were asking them to learn from their failure and use that to embrace another topic without judgment or criticism. FAIL began to stand for "First Attempt In Learning." It not only became an acronym, but a belief with our kids. Attitudes were beginning to change. Once students realized they could research ANYTHING—albeit sword building and computer hacking were slightly nerve-wracking for us—our attendance increased. Genius Hour became a buzz phrase in the school. In January, we invited students in grade six to join. This led to our highest rate of engagement, indicated by the substantial amount of time invested by students, with more than 60% of students voluntarily participating across the three grades.

Intrinsic motivation thrived in the library. On a daily basis during lunch and recess time, there was excitement, collaboration, frustration, investigation, and success in abundance. Students were helping students and encouraging each other, as well as sharing discoveries. We were no longer teachers but mentors. The playing field was leveled, and we stepped down off the teacher podium and let the kids take charge. The freedom the students had to choose, learn, and fail gave them the power to achieve real-life skills in an engaging environment.

Taking It to the Next Level

We were determined to push the envelope further. We began to teach kids how to make appointments with administration in order to receive permission for certain projects, compose and send professional emails, introduce themselves politely and properly, and share their projects with the public, as well as collaborate with and teach others. We encouraged kids to seek funds to secure the materials needed for their projects. We even have one student who has started a business and another who is being hired to draw logos. Our next endeavor is to start a fund where students will have to write a proposal to receive money needed for a project. Sound like real world yet? Let me go one step further.

Collaboration is a large part of our process. Students not only share among themselves, mentoring each other, but reach out to others interested in Genius Hour. The students have shared their projects during lunch with first graders in a designated format, with their families at in informational BYODinner night, and recently at an Educator's Evening, where most dressed up and conversed with educators from around the state.

One of the most meaningful moments of my career was when I informed the kids that we needed to present the findings of our Genius Hour pilot program to the school board. They immediately asked that rather than having the mentors present, they would like to take charge and tell their story. Twelve students spoke eloquently, respectfully, and with amazing skill regarding their passion for Genius Hour. The allotted 10–15 minute presentation turned into well over half an hour. The conviction with which the students spoke was mind-blowing. Not only did they love Genius Hour, they wanted it to spread into other schools. This was empowering for all involved.

Genius Hour is the most powerful thing I have done in over 20 years in education. Watching students engage in the freedom to learn—and more importantly take control of

their own learning—while meeting standards in CCSS, AASL, ISTE, and developing life skills has enabled me to improve and evolve with the process. I highly encourage every librarian to investigate the power of Genius Hour.

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