Book Review:


Eleanor Cerny
University at Albany, State University of New York

**ABSTRACT**

Nell Duke's *Inside Information Developing Powerful Readers and Writers of Informational Text Through Project-Based Instruction* is a practical resource for teachers seeking innovative ways to integrate reading and writing of informational text with project-based inquiry instruction aligned to Common Core State Standards. Duke uses her experience and 20 years as a researcher to guide the reader from beginning to end of this process, starting with the introduction of a strategic launch, through reading and writing of informational text, toward the celebration of publication. Along the way, she provides helpful hints and cautionary insights that an experienced researcher and educator would highlight on behalf of the reader regarding differentiation, classroom management and assessment. The book culminates with suggestions on how to increase the number of project-based inquiry units.

**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

Eleanor Cerny is a doctoral student in the Department of Literacy, Teaching and Learning at the University at Albany, State University of New York. She is also an Instructional Facilitator at a K-5 elementary school in Rockland County, New York. Eleanor has 14 years of experience in the field of education. She can be reached at: ecerny@albany.edu

With Common Core State Standards guiding educational practice, educators and literacy specialists are trying to design and implement curriculum in an efficient, effective and engaging way for both students and teachers. To help meet this obligation, Nell Duke, professor and researcher at University of Michigan, shares her experiences and years of research in *Inside Information: Developing Powerful Readers and Writers of Informational Text Through Project-Based Instruction* (Duke, 2014). Educators, both new and experienced, will find that *Inside Information* is an excellent resource that offers valuable research-based instructional strategies on how to develop powerful readers and writers of informational text through the lens of project-based instruction. Project-based instruction creates an amalgamation of rigorous learning through the integration of literacy and other disciplines while promoting student-led active citizenship. Duke builds upon two influential theorists Dewey and Kilpatrick. As Dewey (1902) informs us that "learning is active" (p.9) and William Kilpatrick (1960) has stated in a taped interview "each child learns what he lives and he learns it in the degree in which he lives it"(Georgia College).

This book is divided into three parts: foundation, project phases and next steps. Duke designed each part to seamlessly include research-based practices and share her experiences to provide the reader with the confidence and appreciation of innovative strategies to practice project-based instruction. With these tools, she encourages practitioners to build internal
capacity within a professional learning community that will encourage others to practice project-based instruction.

**Foundation**

Duke's excitement about and support of seeing an increase in informational text usage in elementary school is evident throughout the book. Duke acknowledges that teachers receive a range of professional development around informational text; therefore, she designed the book so that readers can pick any chapter as an entry point. In part one, Duke informs the reader how to structure a project-based unit, align it to the Common Core Standards, and schedule it within the school year. Project-based instruction goes beyond most curriculum requirements by connecting students and teachers with real-world problems, concerns or issues. This twofold connection allows students to gain the disciplinary knowledge and skills to address community-related issues/policies, while teachers address the knowledge and skills identified in the standards. For example, math, social studies, and literacy skills can be addressed by creating a school map and information packet for new students or visitors; science and literacy skills can be addressed through creating a bird guide for the local nature sanctuary; and local concerns such as hazardous potholes or the value of stop signs can be addressed by writing a letter to the local newspaper or community organization.

**Design and Planning**

Chapter two is one of the many gems in this book that a busy teacher will appreciate. Duke shares planning templates, graphic organizers and reading/writing interest surveys for teachers, students and families, which she has made available in the appendix and on her website. When designing a project-based unit, Duke reminds the reader that the unit should not be confused with a genre study. A genre study does as the title implies, whereas project-based inquiry is based on an event inside or outside of school that can incorporate more than one genre, which is more engaging for students. The design process includes identifying the teacher’s instructional goals, the genres, the project’s purpose, the teacher-guided and student-choice product, and the student-family interest survey. The student-family connection is an extremely valuable learning area outside of the standards; and when included, can provide priceless knowledge and create a positive relationship between school and community. For example, parents may be experts in the topic of a project, or be able to provide insight regarding cultural traditions, or even share their knowledge about hobbies that relate to a research topic. This partnership can provide opportunities that allow students to see real-life connections between literacy and other disciplines.

**Real Learning Throughout the Phases**

The foundation and project phases guide the reader with invaluable resources and suggestions that will help an educator differentiate instruction and resources. Duke suggests that real learning takes place during each phase of the inquiry unit. Starting with the launch phase, moving through the reading, writing and research phase, culminating with the final presentation and celebration phase. She cautions the reader that the project launch must be successful as it will be a major factor in the implementation of the project-based learning unit. This caution is the foundation of Dewey’s (1918) structure of inquiry “On the other hand, to set up a problem that does not grow out of an actual situation is to start on a course of dead work, nonetheless dead because the work is "busy work."

She suggests a quick way to measure the launch success is to ask students one or both of the following questions, “Why are you writing that?” or "Why are you reading that?" The answer can be the compass of the launch's success and navigate the teacher to stay on course, alter course or shift altogether. Duke guides the reader
through the launch starting with examples of introductory lessons to classroom management strategies for whole-class, small group or individual work time.

**Read to Learn, Learn to Read with Informational Text**

Nell Duke acknowledges that the reading and research phase is complex and admits she could write a whole book around reading and research; but has condensed her suggestions to meet the basic requirements of *what, when and how* to teach in the reading and research phase. In this chapter Duke not only answers these three questions, but also provides her research of informational text to support her suggestions. In doing so, Duke refers the reader to her earlier research regarding the value of taking time to build content knowledge, "building knowledge is an essential component of effective comprehension instruction" (p.75). To answer "what to teach", Duke identifies targets of instruction that the teacher should consider when teaching reading and research which emphasize the student’s use of comprehension strategies while reading and researching. In addition to comprehension strategies, these targets include standards, text structure, graphics, text features, vocabulary, and sourcing and evaluation.

To answer "how to teach", Duke focuses on four principles that will develop students' knowledge and skills. Most teachers, novice or experienced, might consider the reference to the principles along with the chart of CCSS aligned instructional techniques for multiple grade levels a gift from the author. The first principle adheres to Vygotsky’s theory of gradual release of responsibility. Duke explains this in an easy ten-step approach as the teacher moves from whole class, onto small group/individual instruction toward the wrap up. According to Duke, the second principle, read-aloud, is very important for comprehension because an elementary school student's reading comprehension is not as strong as his/her listening comprehension until middle school. The third principle, needs-based grouping, extends the practice of grouping by reading level to grouping by comprehension needs to allow for more small group specific reading strategy instruction. The fourth principle, smart support, focuses on support that students need to engage with and complete the project successfully. A few examples of smart support include providing a re-reading or audio version of the text in order to enhance comprehension for students who need additional support; or extending the project-based inquiry through deeper, more probing questions for students who need an additional challenge; or for dual language learners, providing text in the student's primary language.

**Learn to Write with Informational Text**

In next phase, Duke focuses on the instructional targets of writing and how they apply to the research phase. In the author's particular way, she advises the reader that her list of key features is only a suggested list, stressing that state standards, mentor texts and teacher observations will point out which additional writing standards need to be taught.

To answer the question, how to teach in the writing and research phase, Duke does not fall short. She recognizes the complexity involved and provides five fundamental practices to help effectively and efficiently instruct student writers. Based on her experience and observations, Duke cautions the reader that there are two areas where teachers falter. Teachers can omit explicit instruction or release students too early. Duke emphasizes the importance of teacher modeling writing, using mentor text, and analyzing writing style through author studies. Duke shares her research based on interactive writing 10.5 minutes per day in a first grade classroom, the students' growth as writers was distinguishable. The gain came from teacher modeling and jointly composing text through teacher-student interaction, the practice of scaffolding interactive writing. As some teachers use data to drive instruction, Duke reminds the
reader of the value of assessments to inform writing instruction, as well as, writing checklists and rubrics.

Revision and editing, as Duke admits in the end of chapter six, is the phase where most teachers "teach least well including Duke, herself." Yet again, for someone who feels that she teaches this least well, she shares two valuable overarching principles for guiding students through revision and editing: use multiple strategies and provide feedback. Duke provides twelve strategies, such as: reminding students of the audience, model and explicit teaching of revision and editing, provide specific feedback, focus on one thing at a time like not overloading on revisions, create revision focus groups for whole class or small groups, provide praise, and use the standards.

Regarding feedback, Duke strongly suggests that it should be genre- or unit-specific, not generic. Once again, Duke reminds the reader of the standards, this time related to technology usage. Students should know how to provide feedback and edit using technology tools, as they do with print. Such tools could include online word processing applications that promote collaboration and peer editing amongst students, as well as, between the student and teacher. Feedback should be focused and structured, therefore, the usage of checklists and forms might aid in this phase. In this area, Duke encourages the reader to reflect on when it is appropriate for students to move away from forms and checklists. Since research is limited in this area, she encourages school discussion regarding this topic.

During the project-based inquiry presentation and celebration phase the author provides one initial caution, only share students' work with the audience when it is ready and the audience should be able to read it. For young writers, it may be necessary for the teacher to translate the students' writing. For a celebration, try your best to obtain a response from the audience, this feedback shows the students that their efforts were appreciated and further develops the importance of communication.

**Building a Library of Project-Based Inquiry Units**

As Duke mentioned initially, start with one project-based unit and then you will see and feel the power to try another. In Duke’s follow-up section, she offers strategies to make this manageable. First, be strategic. Some projects can be recycled each year, some rotated every second or third year and some can be based on current events. Looking ahead, plan your year of project-based inquiry units. Don't plan too many or too few. Utilize other resources in the school such as sharing project-based inquiry units amongst the grade level or collaborating with the curriculum coordinator to develop a unit. Duke does remind the reader that some believe that a project-based unit must germinate from the classroom students. Her description on project-based inquiry states that it is a project-based approach over an extended time to solve a real problem or address a real need.

Duke confirms that implementing someone else's project does not have to be done with fidelity; it can be revised to meet the needs of the students in your class and your instructional goals. She goes on to challenge the reader to collaborate and create a Professional Learning Community around developing project based units. Once again, Duke provides a template created by Walpole and Najera (2013) to guide educators through this collaborative process.

**Strengths, Suggestions and Questions**

This book has many strengths such as the author's research expertise in the field, applicable tools that new or experienced literacy educators can utilize to teach disciplinary literacy, and the author's obvious appreciation and recognition of teachers' desire to become more
efficient and effective in their instruction during this transitional time towards more rigorous standards.

While the book has numerous resources, some teachers may want more guidance on how to meet the needs of students in their classroom, whether the needs are English language learners or learners of different modalities and abilities. To be a more inclusive resource for the teaching of reading and writing of informational text in project-based inquiry learning, educators might benefit from additional resources that meet the range of needs presented by students. However, when students are solving real-world problems and are encouraged to use multiple genres, a busy teacher will need to read this book carefully to make sure they benefit from learning and using strategies for finding multiple resources.

This book raised important questions for me regarding appropriate resources. As school districts financially manage curriculum resources, how can technology help educators meet what Duke has termed “smart support”? As we encourage students to inquire and use different genres to present their solutions, how can educators effectively and confidently guide students towards these resources? *Inside Information* is a valuable toolbox for K-5 educators; it will inspire teachers to integrate literacy and content with new methodologies that will engage students to become proficient consumers and producers of informational texts.
References


