

The Gift Project

-Jason Blair

The Project:

The gift project provides an opportunity for students to build empathy, exercise perspective taking, harness creative thinking and making, to make connections and build relationships. The idea behind the gift project is that students get the opportunity to create for someone else. In an education system that seems to prioritize competition, individualism and speed, this project seeks the opposite. The gift project is about slowing down to have a conversation, to learn by creating for someone else, and to turn competition into collaboration. This project is a great one to return to throughout the year, as the class forms a closer bond and relationships grow stronger.

The [Human-Centered Design process](#) is a good way to structure this project.

Inspiration:

To begin the inspiration phase, each student will have a partner. This is an opportunity for students to stretch out of comfort zones. The teacher can select the groups to ensure they are thoroughly mixed, or the students can select the groups. If the students select the groups, some time should be spent on why they should try and step out of their comfort zone. Once the students select a partner, the first task is to conduct an empathy interview. The idea with the interview is that students gain a deeper understanding of who they are creating the gift for. It is not about asking only "favorite questions," but questions that uncover who the person truly is. It is important to have a good discussion about interviewing before letting the students go to interview. When the students get into the interview, remind them to make sure they ask follow up questions. If a student reveals something sad, like the passing of a loved one, they should acknowledge how difficult that must have been. It is not about asking questions as fast as you can. You don't want a student to say they lost a loved one, and the partner immediately asks, "so what's your favorite color?" Exercising empathy is about slowing down to both hear the answers, but feel them as well. Turning the students free to interview without this conversation will result in shallow, meaningless connections.

Here is a general list of some types of questions students might ask

What have you been doing over the past 6 months?
What are you most proud of and why?
What are your best talents?
What do you look for in a friend and why?
What do you miss most when you are at school and why?
Which would you choose, read, write, or build and why?
What is one thing that would help you this year and why?
What is one object you think would be awesome to have in class and why?
What is your best memory and why?
Where is your happy place and why?
What makes you laugh?
What makes you smile?
Where do you like to spend your time on the weekends?
Who is your hero and why?
What is something that makes you sad?
What is something that excites you?
What is the strangest memory?
What is the funniest thing to happen to you?
What makes you feel safe and why?
What do you like to hold?
What do you like to touch?
What do you like to smell?
What do you like to taste?
What do you like to hear?
What makes your blood boil?
What do you wish everyone had and why?

What are you nervous about and why?
What scares you and why?
What is your favorite time of day and why?
If you could do anything you wanted, what would it be and why?
Who do you admire and why?
Why did the chicken really cross the road?
What are some questions you have for me?

If students only get to 1 question, but have a really interesting conversation around it, and they feel like it is insightful to who they are, then that is ok too. It is not about asking the most questions, it is about gaining a deeper understanding about who the person is.

Ideation:

At the ideation phase, students look over the answers and reflect on the conversation. Then, students generate ideas based on these answers. The ideas should relate in some way to one or more of the answers. Their ideas could be symbolic or representational. At the end of this phase, there should be some documentation of sketches, lists, interview questions or any other evidence of ideation.

Example: I learned that my partners best memory is having overnights with their grandma. I also learned that their grandma is their hero. I might create a mini sweater out of fabric scraps, since they told me when they went on overnights, they would wear their grandmas sweater to bed. I also want to create a bowling pin trophy since one of the activities they did with their grandma on the overnights was go bowling. So, I am creating a bowling pin trophy with a sweater on it. It represents their love for their grandma.

This artifact combines several answers into one object. It was clear from the interview that their grandma plays a special role in their life, so that is why the focus was on her.

Implementation:

At this phase, the student begins to create the artifact. The student can use whatever materials are available. This phase will take some time. To speed it up, you could have the students draw it or make a collage out of magazines.

The last part of the implementation phase is to wrap the gift and create a card to share with the partner. This card can explain the symbolism behind the gift and also serve as a thank you note for taking time to share a little about themselves and demonstrate empathy and vulnerability in the process.

Reflection/Celebration:

A gift giving ceremony! Have students find their partner and have a gift exchange celebration. Provide time for the students to share and explain their thinking too. Remind the students this is not about completing the task and saying, "I'm done!" It is about having a conversation, sharing laughter and finding joy together.

Email me with any questions

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