

2-14-2017

## Supporting Sixth Grade History Projects

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### Recommended Citation

Bremer, Peter. "Supporting Sixth-Grade History Projects." *The Reference Librarian* 58.2 (2017): 174-177.

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## **Supporting Sixth Grade History Projects**

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Most of our library patrons at the University of Minnesota, Morris are of college age, between 18 and 22 years of age, but we have a decidedly younger group that we service as well. For the past 10 years Rodney A. Briggs Library has reached out to sixth graders at the local public elementary school in order to support their Minnesota history projects, which includes a 10-page research paper. Although teachers there have decided not to participate in the formal History Day activities, the assignment is modeled loosely on the popular event established by David Van Tassel, and offers the opportunity for young people to learn more about the state in which they live.

“Many academic library programs provide outreach to the public domain, whether that means going into the community itself or by working with other libraries in the area” (Schneider, 2003, p. 204). Just down the road from us in Central Minnesota, Saint Cloud State University (SCSU) has reached out to area 6-12 grade students in support of their projects, believing “it can be especially rewarding for academic libraries to assist History Day students in their quest for knowledge of the past” (Sternan & Motin, 2010, p. 26). Such efforts bring communities and institutions together in a spirit of collaboration. Because of the rich dividends that can result from community outreach, our own sixth grade history project efforts, as well as a separate program involving juniors and seniors from a nearby high school who take part in a information literacy scavenger hunt, have the full backing of our director and enthusiastic support from staff.

Each fall Briggs Library, along with the Morris Public Library and the Stevens County Historical Museum, send representatives to the Morris Area Elementary School and share information about resources that might be useful to students as they research their topic. This coincides with each sixth grader having picked their topics and getting it approved by their

teacher. Examples of past topics have included Charles A. Lindbergh, Fort Ripley, Lake Superior, the First Minnesota Civil War regiment, Lake Itasca State Park, Minnesota art history, and record snow storms.

After I coordinate the schedules of the public library and museum director as well as the sixth grade classrooms, a date is set. On the appointed day, usually in the autumn months of October or early November, approximately 80 sixth graders from three separate classrooms converge in the high school auditorium and listen to our presentations with varying degrees of attentiveness. Each speaker's presentation is different and mirrors the strengths of the individual institution. The local history museum often accentuates physical artifacts, holding up a well-worn military uniform or turn of the century medical tool, to the astonishment of the young people gathered, while the public library showcases its catalog and the wealth of resources that it can uncover with only a library card needed to check them out.

Prior to Briggs Library's presentation, I draft a letter to each child's parents where I invite their son or daughter to come explore what our university library has to offer and then distribute it to classroom teachers the day of the event so the letters can be taken home. Because Briggs Library has few historical artifacts of interest and because our resources often go far beyond our catalog, my PowerPoint presentation focuses on the many ways in which our library as a whole can assist young researchers. This includes images of our building and spaces, highlighting computers and collections of books and serials, both print and electronic, of course, as well as our databases, many of which are included in the underutilized Electronic Library of Minnesota (ELM). The latter is a collection of information and research databases accessed by Minnesota residents through their own affiliation with a school, public or academic library and funded by state appropriations. Currently, ELM consists of over 60 databases. Some of these are

very scholarly in nature while others focus on community needs such as health information. Some, however, have content tailored specifically for a K-12 student population. This includes encyclopedias, magazine and journal articles, biographies and, the holy grail of history projects, primary source materials. I don't spend a lot of time searching during my presentation because the Internet at the school can be a bit slow, and also because as librarians we tend to think that typing search terms in boxes is more fascinating than it really is. I also want to give myself enough time to highlight the services we offer, namely research assistance.

Briggs Library has five librarians on staff. Although I am the primary outreach librarian, we all assist in providing reference assistance. At this point in the presentation I show a picture of our smiling quartet, and then another featuring a group of famous Marvel personas, with the title, Information Superheroes. I try to stress to the students that although Briggs offers books and electronic content, we also are ready to help them with their research, guiding with our hidden powers the secret ways to find good information on Google, in databases, and through library catalogs.

At the end of my 15-minute presentation, I take questions from the students. A number of hands invariably shoot up. Many of the children ask if we have books on specific subjects or individuals. To these I always answer that we can usually find something good for them, whether it's in print or ebook form, in the stacks or on the web. Then I remind each student to fill out the community card which accompanies the letter being sent home to their parents and to visit Briggs Library. Finally, I mention our upcoming research retreat.

Before the seasonal holidays I ask each sixth grade teacher put out a sign-up sheet which invites students to come into the library for an after school research session on their topic. This activity is timed so that we can help students find any additional resources before their draft

bibliography is due in early January. On average, between 10 and 12 sixth graders take us up on the offer of some research assistance. A short list of students and their topics is sent over beforehand by the teachers so we can begin the process of assigning at least two students per librarian and then check on the availability of resources.

I meet the students in our library lobby, many of whom have never set foot in our building before, and take them to our work area, an upstairs computer lab, which is more accommodating for the gathering. Location is key. Easy access to resources and technology is important, but proximity to college-aged students who might be studying can also be an issue. “When deciding if you can host younger students in your library, identify a space or a number of locations you can use in the library to facilitate activities” (Thorne-Ortiz, 2015, pp.120-121). At Briggs Library we have utilized both our instruction lab as well as a series of public computers on our main floor with equal success, although being able to contain the inevitable noise does come in handy.

It takes a fair amount of juggling to help 2-3 young historians at the same time. First each librarian needs to hear directly from the student what the focus of their topic is. Then we verify what information has already been found and what they are having a hard time locating. I will use many of the resources I mentioned in my presentation, taking time to show them how I’m searching and asking them if a particular resource is helpful. Once we find a good book or article or webpage, I will help them retrieve it from the shelf or print it out for free. If they have a community card filled out, they are invited to check out any items before departing.

Our formal research session usually lasts around an hour and a half, but students are invited to stay longer if needed, with librarians assisting as necessary. One by one, parents stop

in and pick up their son or daughter. For some, it is their first time being in Briggs Library or even on campus.

One of the tangible benefits of our history project outreach, beyond the practical goal of supporting student research and the acquisition of information literacy skills, is the opportunity for young people and their parents to experience what our university can offer. With it comes the realization that our campus isn't just for college-age students, but rather, students of all ages. In this way the stereotypical town-gown divide becomes a little more transparent. Some may even consider UMM as a future home when it comes time to choose a college. Our main goal, though, is that community members will come to see our university as a partner in their lives, and our library as one of several local places where they can turn for research assistance.

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