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Buy American!” the bumper sticker on the car in front of us sternly admonishes. But what does that mean? The car that sports it is a Ford—made in Mexico. We are driving a Honda—made in Tennessee. Which is one of ours and which is one of theirs?

Surely there is nothing more American than a Barbie doll. Barbie, at least, must be ours, and her manufacturer, Mattel, is based in California. But she was originally created in Germany (modeled after a German bar girl for American soldiers). Barbie and her friends are made of plastic manufactured from Arabian oil, with hair created in Japan, pellets from Taiwan, clothing sewn in factories in China and the Philippines. Her various parts are assembled in factories in mainland China. Only then does she join the parade of millions of immigrants who have come to the shores of the United States to become American. At that point, she will most likely take up residence on the store shelves of a multinational corporate entity while she awaits purchase. Indeed, there are very few manufactured items that we use these days that can be said to be 100 percent Made in the USA.

In a consumer society like ours, many children are far removed from a sense of connection to even the most basic elements of survival. Their food appears on the table or in vending machines; their shelter is built not from stones, mud, trees, or animal skins in the neighborhood, but from lumber and
plasterboard and bricks produced in distant, unseen sawmills and factories.

Ironically, as the world becomes increasingly interdependent and complex, a young person’s perception of it may become equally disconnected and simplistic. Their clothing comes from stores in malls, separated by generations and continents from the Spinning Jenny their great, great-grandmothers might have used to make cotton or flax into thread; or from the process of trapping, skinning, tanning, and stitching that their ancestors perfected in order to have winter coats.

One of the simplest entry points to this kind of learning is through an exploration of everyday materials—the things that ordinary people use on a regular basis. It might be the clothing we wear; the cars we drive; the computers, CD players, VCRs, or televisions we use; the food we eat; or the sports equipment we shoot, kick, pass, pitch, or wear.

What can we learn about the world through an exploration of a simple, ordinary object? This approach, developed with artist–educator Don Fels, is exemplified by a project assignment, which makes clear the depth of learning that is possible.

A Product Research Project

The following three-week (or longer) project provides an opportunity for students to learn more about how the economic world of the twenty-first century operates, and how economic factors influence cultural, social, geographical, and political factors as well. Students will trace the manufacture and distribution of common, ordinary products and will discover just how complicated that trail is. They will come to an understanding of why it makes economic sense to build a factory in Sri Lanka, or the Philippines, rather than to build it down the block the way they might have fifty years ago. And why, a couple of years from now, it will make economic sense to abandon those factories in order to move to a new location and build another factory where labor costs are a little lower and the environmental standards are a little more lax.

Learning About the World Through Ordinary Things

Product research is a good subject to focus on for learning about the world for a number of reasons. First, it begins with the students. They will be researching items that they value, that they care about, that they actually wear or use. This means they are likely to be interested in the activity and invested in its outcome. Students will come to realize that people spend their work lives manufacturing the items we use, and there are significant economic, geographic, and political consequences to the economic connections that
encircle the globe. They will also find out that the people who make their shoes and shirts may not experience the kinds of lives and working conditions the students wish they would.

Second, encouraging students to carry out open-ended research about the manufacturing process is an apolitical approach to what can be contentious and partisan issues. You are not asking students to uncover dirty practices or scandal, to proclaim or denounce economic systems, or to come to a particular or predetermined conclusion. You are simply asking them to find out what they can find out about the manufacturing process and the process of moving goods around the world.

Third, students are learning how to carry out research, and this is a set of skills and behaviors that will serve them throughout the rest of their lives. Fourth, students learn more about working in groups by dealing with others to carry out projects and to make presentations to others in order to share what they have learned.

Finally, the project serves as a touchstone for the rest of the year, and beyond. It encourages students to make connections, to realize that various elements of the world community are related in various ways, and to understand that those connections have consequences. This project will help students learn about the world, starting with what they are wearing, eating, kicking, and/or catching. It starts local and touches the farthest reaches of the planet, and once they see the connections, they will never look at their world the same way ever again.

More About Open-Ended Research

Open-ended research leads to an increased understanding of complex, interconnected, interrelated situations. Even that sentence is complex, but what it means is actually pretty simple. Take a look at something in the world that you are curious about—find out why it is the way it is, how it came to be that way, how it relates to the larger world in which it exists. It’s what we do in the real world when we want to know something, and it is something we can help our students learn and practice.

The kind of research encouraged here is different from that often practiced in school. It is an open-ended process, so called because it is not aimed at a predetermined, correct answer but is in response to a real question. This means many things, including the following:

• The student may or may not find what he or she is looking for, in terms of desired information.

• Original questions may give way to other, more relevant or compelling questions as the research continues.
• There is no preset agenda that the researcher brings to the research except to find out as much as possible about a topic or product.

• There is no one, complete source for information, and a thorough search may require consulting several different kinds of resources.

• The most effective manner of report may only become evident after the research has been done. What the researcher decides to communicate about his or her research will have a strong bearing on the ways in which the results are communicated.

This kind of research takes patience, trial and error, and the ability to make connections and to see patterns. It takes practice, and paying attention. It offers students the opportunity to search for meaning, to ask real questions as the process continues: What have I found? What does it mean? How are the pieces related? What have I missed? Who’s voice is absent or overbearing? What doesn’t fit? How is this like or unlike other things I have studied? Where do I go next? In addition, there is a real need to self-monitor the research process, to check and recheck, and to make sure that you are not leaving out a point of view or a constituent who has something to say.

This is the way real people learn about things in the real world. We ask real questions and then try to figure out how to answer them as well as possible. It isn’t looking up the state capitol of Washington, on page 52 of the W volume; it is posing a real, multifaceted question of real interest, then taking the time to find out what you can find.

This is an open-ended assignment, and as such may require some fine-tuning as it goes. You know your students, your curriculum schedule, and your resources. Make the assignment as challenging, as ongoing, and as structured (or un-) as you and your students are ready to handle. Make the presentations more structured or traditional if that fits the needs of you and your students. The bottom line is not the assignment (it never is); it is the learning of the students. Do what is right for them and for you.

Project Overview

This assignment is designed for groups of three or four students. Each group should select a product that is made somewhere outside of this country and find out as much as possible about the production and distribution of that product. Each group will make a presentation to the rest of the class. This presentation is designed to be multidimensional rather than simply written and read, though as mentioned before, do what makes the most sense for you and your students.
**The Steps**

There are many steps and this may seem intimidating at first, but there is nothing complicated about the process. It usually takes two to three weeks (though not every day and not always full periods) to carry out, so make sure you give yourself and your students enough time to complete it. It’s well worth the time you give to the project.

1. Ask students to read the labels of their favorite items of clothing, sporting equipment, CD player, or something they use to find out what they can about where it is made. This can be done as a homework question, or in class; although as a homework assignment, it allows students to research items they have there (and to read labels from clothing they may not be able to access in a classroom). Make a list of the products on the board using the information the students have obtained from the label. Typically, the information says something like: Made in Taiwan or Manufactured in Macao or perhaps Assembled in China.

2. Form small groups. There are many ways to do this; use a method that works for you and your students. Ask each group to choose one product to research.

3. Help students generate a list of questions about their products. You might begin by having the student groups make their own lists, or you might choose to share a list of questions such as the one that follows. There are advantages to each approach. Starting with a teacher-generated list helps beginning researchers focus and provides them with some structure. Student-generated lists might take longer to compile and may not immediately lead to efficient research efforts; however, the students will learn more about research, about posing questions, and about working together. They will be able to make changes to their own lists as they perceive the need to do so, furthering their learning.

Here is a sample list of questions in case you make that choice. Feel free to substitute your own questions, or to pick from among this list:

- Where was your product made?
- Where is this country located on a map? Who are its immediate neighbors?
- What is it like there? What is the climate of the region? What grows there?
- How do people live their lives? What are their beliefs and customs and institutions and values?
• Who owns or controls the factory where the product is produced?
• Who works in this factory? Where do they come from? How were they recruited?
• What would they be doing if they were not working in the factory? What other kinds of work possibilities are there in the place that they live?
• Who designed the product? Who is it made for?
• How does the product get from the factory to the store in which it is sold (e.g., REI, Old Navy, or The Gap)? Include in this answer as much information as you can find about the product’s path.
• How much does it cost to make the product?
• How much does it cost to buy the product?
• How much do the people who make the product get paid?
• Where would the product have been made 100 years ago?
• What do the factory workers wear in their everyday lives and where do those clothes come from? This question is most appropriate if the students are researching an item of clothing (e.g., what kinds of shoes are they wearing while they manufacture Nike sneakers).
• Why was the product made overseas rather than near to the place it is sold?
• What is the connection between the local store and the factory: Do they own it or contract with a local owner, or are there some other arrangements?
• What impact has the factory had on the area in which it exists?
• What is your research trail? What did you try and where would you go next if you had more time? (This step must be included in the report.)

5. Brainstorm a list of possible sources of information about the product. Where might you go to learn more about the place the product is made, about the people who make the product, and about the process involved in making and delivering the product? (A potential list of sources is included later in this activity.) Assist students as needed based on their skill levels, knowledge, and experience. You want them to grow and learn (don’t give them all the answers), but you don’t want them to be overwhelmed or too frustrated such that they get nowhere and give up. Have the students post their research discoveries (good sources of information) in a public part of the room so that all can benefit from their finds.
6. Create a timeline for the project. It is important for you to set check-points along the way so that you (and the students) can monitor how groups are proceeding and problem solve whenever necessary. Set up library time, either in the school library or at the public library (or both). Make contact with the librarians because they may be able to gather books on the topic, if given enough lead-time, so that you can make good use of your time there. Some libraries will also allow you to check out large numbers of books to the classroom so that you can do research at home. Reserve time in the school computer lab if you have Internet access.

Note: Make sure to allow sufficient time for research responses, especially to inquiries via email or letter, which may take some time. Many companies have local offices and toll-free numbers to their corporate headquarters should you need to make calls there. Otherwise, more and more contact is able to be made through websites, which offer the possibility, though not the certainty, of a quick response.

7. This is an opportunity to teach and practice research skills. The following are several related and relevant skills for this task:
- How does reading nonfiction differ from reading fiction?
- How do you evaluate information?
- How do you deal with conflicting information?
- How do you recognize the role of bias and point of view in what you are finding in print, on the Internet, through interviews?
- How do you know what to write down and what to let go so that you don’t end up copying everything?
- How do you know when you have enough information?
- How do you keep track of your information and sources so that you (or someone else) can find them again?
- How do you conduct an interview?
- How do you recognize your own bias or point of view? What role might that play in your research efforts?
- How do you make sure all voices and points of view are included?
- How do you make sure that you are not simply getting company or official policy?

It makes sense to practice these skills (those you choose to focus on) as a whole group. It is best to have students practice the desired skill with material that is simple enough (content- and readingwise) so
that the sole challenge is the new skill to be learned. Once they are comfortable with the new skill, they will then be able to apply it to their particular research process as a next step.

8. Divide the work so that everyone is involved. Take advantage of skills and interests within each group so that the students are building on their strengths, and also learning new skills.

9. Conduct check-in meetings with each group. It’s a chance to ask the group what they’ve found, and for you to assess whether they are making progress. You can also help them to make sense of what they are finding. For example, one group kept running into dead-ends while researching Nike, and they decided to identify those dead-ends as information—Nike is not willing to answer our questions—that got included in their presentation. You can help group members decide what more they need to find out, and help them develop a plan for doing so. Review the students’ research trail with them at this time, both to remind them that they should have one (in writing), because it will help you and them discover possible gaps in their research strategy to date, and to suggest possible future research steps they might take.

10. Students then carry out additional research based on the check-in meeting. What does the group still need to do?

11. Then the groups plan a presentation for the rest of the class. Guiding questions include: What will you share about what you have found? How is it best for you to share it? The following are several presentation models you might choose:
   • Skits and role-plays
   • Maps
   • Collages, posters, paintings
   • Music
   • Brief lecture-style presentations
   • Audience involvement
   • Models representing the product or process
   • Videodocumentary
   • Some combination of approaches

Remind students that they and their classmates will be sitting through several of these presentations. What can they do to help their audience stay interested and learn about the product from them?
12. Help the students to decide what they need in order to make their presentation, and to strategize how they will get those items.

13. Make sure a written research trail is included with each group’s materials, documenting where they found information and how one could locate it again.

14. Students should evaluate their group process. How did it go? What would they do differently? How did each of them help his or her group carry out the task? What did he or she learn about the product? Were they successful in helping each other to learn? How do they know that?

15. Consider taking social action. What have we learned, and are there related public steps we might want to take in response to what we have found? Could we carry out education campaigns to let others know about the situation? Write letters to newspapers, or to the local school district, if what students have found has possible implications for district policy (like deciding not to buy products from companies who are operating sweatshops, for example).

16. Pulling it all together. How was what the class groups found out different and how was it similar? What are common issues and what is unique to each industry? How might the class share this information, or communicate about it with others? How does it relate to other issues we have studied in U.S. history, in state history, or elsewhere? How are the lives of the workers similar or different to those of workers in the United States, in our hometown, or related to those of us in this classroom? How have things changed over time in our own community? We can investigate the last question in terms of the types of work that people do, the working conditions at their job sites, the people who are in the labor force (race, gender, age), and the consequences that arise from those changes.

Where to Look for Information

One of the major challenges to succeeding in this project is to make sure that the students can find enough information about their product. This is more possible than you (and your students) might think at first. There are several major sources of information for a project like this, including people you or your students already know; school and public libraries; the Internet (see some useful websites listed at the end of this chapter); the port authority (in coastal cities); warehouses connected to trucking, the railroads, or airports in inland locations; local or federal government records; people who work in the
store in which the item was purchased; and industry journals and magazines.

It is a very good idea to actually try this process out yourself before introducing the project so that you will be familiar with potential pitfalls and possible points of frustration for your students. Problem solve what you can ahead of time so that you can be of use to the groups as they run up against seeming dead-ends. Finally, remember that the presentation at the end is not the real objective of the lesson. We want students to learn as much as they can about open-ended research, about the production and shipping of products around the world, and about the interdependence of the world’s economic system. Your students will find what they are able to find, and they shouldn’t get too stressed over not finding enough information about their product.

The following is a list of possible resources that I share with my students when they start on this assignment in Seattle, Washington. Obviously, you will want to modify the list to fit available local and Internet resources.

**SAMPLE RESOURCES**

- People who have lived in the countries in which the products are produced, including family members, family friends, people who work with parents or guardians, or members of the school community
- Jackson School at the University of Washington. This division of the university is dedicated to outreach to the public, and features departments related to various regions of the world—for example, SE Asia, East Asia, Africa, Russia, Eastern Europe
- Port of Seattle and Tacoma (inland locations might look to railway, airport, or trucking warehouses or shipping yards)
- The Seattle Public Library’s business section
- University of Washington Library
- Seattle sister city office: Seattle has more than twenty sister city connections around the world—for example, Kobe, Japan; Bergen, Norway; Haiphong, Vietnam
- S.C.O.R.E.—operated by the small business administration, staffed by volunteers who are retired from the business community; located in the Federal building in downtown Seattle
- Books and magazines
- Films—It can be a challenge to sort out what is accurate and what is receiving the Hollywood treatment, but the location shots can give information about the geography, housing, and climate
- Forums and lectures
• City or county agencies
• Cultural centers and cultural organizations
• Company websites and home offices, many of which have toll-free numbers
• Websites that are related to the product, topic, or theme—for example, coffee-industry magazines and organizations
• Related union websites, newsletters, journals, and individuals
• People who work at the store in which the product is sold—salespeople, buyers, managers, truckdrivers, or the company president may have information to share about the path your item has taken; however, it may turn out that no one at that store knows anything . . .

Product Research Reports

Sample From a Fourth/Fifth-Grade Classroom

During the World Trade Organization meetings and demonstrations in Seattle during November–December 1999, my fourth- and fifth-grade students got very interested in the reasons for the meetings and the protests. I had been at the demonstrations the previous day, so we compared my experience with what the students saw on television. We spoke in general terms about the issues and concerns of the demonstrators, including child labor, environmental degradation, decision making (and the impact of WTO on democracy), genetic engineering, and genetically modified foods. While this product research unit was created and designed for secondary classes, it is adaptable, with adequate support, for younger students. I worked with my class to engage in a modified product research project.

We decided to find out what we could about a product used at school. Many of the students play soccer, so we chose soccer balls. Because this was our first try at open-ended research, and because the students are nine- to ten-year-olds, we researched this as a class rather than in small groups. When we began researching the production of soccer balls, the search quickly brought us to several pieces of information, which were gathered in a few afternoons by a team of students:

• A great majority of soccer balls are produced in Pakistan, in and around the town of Sialkot.
• About 10,000 urban workers and 30,000 rural workers are involved in making soccer balls.
• ILO (International Labor Organization) estimates as many as 7,000 Pakistani children between 5 and 14 handstitch soccer balls, working at
least 8 hours a day to make about 50 cents per ball; each completes maybe two balls a day.

- Only 22 to 25 percent of the Pakistani children go to school.
- The balls are sewn by hand.
- Child labor is a major component of the soccer ball industry.
- There are labor organizations working to change the policy of child labor. Companies, such as Nike, Reebok, and others, are both complicit in the child labor practices, and now committed to changing that policy, at least according to their public statements.
- There is a subcontractor who delivers soccer ball kits to workers in villages. The children and other workers then stitch the balls and return them to the subcontractor, who in turn returns the soccer balls to contractors (often foreign-owned) who make the balls for U.S. (and worldwide) sales.

- Soccer balls are made from synthetic leather.
- Soccer balls are made of several layers of material, usually polyester or cotton. The more layers there are, the better the soccer ball.
- Soccer balls are not all the same size.

The team then chose to communicate about the child labor issue to other students and the adults in the school community, to let the gym teacher know that child laborers might well make the soccer balls they were using. Several students also approached their soccer coaches (outside of school) expressing their concerns.

We found Pakistan on a map and located some pictures of the country to find out a little about what life would be like there. We learned about other child labor issues in Pakistan, including the story of Iqbal Masih—a Pakistani child who had been enslaved in the rug-making industry since age four. He managed to escape and traveled around the world telling about his experiences until he was murdered at age twelve.

The students were very excited to discover Craig Kielburger, a then twelve-year-old student in Toronto, Canada (he’s now college age), who read about Iqbal and decided to find out about child labor for himself. He traveled around the world to see the situation firsthand, and then began an organization of fellow students who were determined to stop the practice of child labor worldwide. To date, Free the Children has built more than 250 schools for poor children around the world, and the organization has worked tirelessly to get cities and towns to commit to refusing to allow the sale of any product manufactured using child labor.
The students took inspiration from Mr. Kielburger, only slightly older than themselves, and took on social action projects in our community. For example, they decided that the dirt field and ratty playground next to our school was a problem. The park had graffiti everywhere and a field was just dirt, which means mud during most of the school year in Seattle. There was garbage everywhere and no lights, so it was a very unpleasant place to play. The students, with the help of an architect, prepared a presentation for the Seattle City Council, complete with photographs and essays; the city responded. There is now a grass field in place next to the school.

The research from this particular product (soccer balls) also leads back to the major current events of our day. The United States concluded its bombing runs over Afghanistan and then threatened to take the so-called War on Terrorism to other countries; Iraq, Iran, and North Korea were identified as the “axis of evil” by the President, and Pakistan has been mentioned as well. Well, Afghanistan is right next door to Pakistan, and the Pashtuns (among others) are a significant portion of the population in both nations. Early in the twenty-first century, Pakistan and India were lined up at their common border threatening war. So, we have to wonder, What will happen to those children who make the soccer balls we kick and throw should U.S. leaders decide to bomb there next, or if war breaks out between India and Pakistan?

Three Middle School Classrooms

Three middle school classes at Summit K–12 in Seattle took on this project in the fall of 2002, with certain modifications. They structured an assignment that would require teams of students to research either clothing or products manufactured in countries outside of the United States and were sold in Seattle stores, as described in this chapter. The teachers adapted the assignment to focus on three specific student projects. Each student team was responsible for creating a posterboard featuring photographs, facts, and other information concerning the product being researched. The teams also were required to create and present a skit highlighting a point of conflict or tension related to the manufacture of the product. Then, they had to write and perform a forty-five second commercial about the product. Note: The teachers chose these three activities from the long list of project options presented earlier in this chapter. They could have chosen others (and so can you).

As a follow-up, the classes carried out various social action steps, on individual, small-group, and whole-class levels, which are described later in the chapter. The teams also prepared a three-class display for the lobby of the school.

The project lasted for approximately three weeks in the classrooms at Summit. They could have gone on longer, and all three teachers are clear that they will return to the project often during the school year as they encounter...
other countries and issues in geography, Washington State History, and Current Events classes.

Structure
The teachers offered their students a number of structural supports along the way. The group Learning Guidelines Information Sheet helped the students to organize themselves and to develop a plan for their product research project (see Appendix A at the end of this chapter).

The teachers grouped the long list of possible guiding questions into four categories: (1) questions about the country, (2) questions about the factory, (3) questions about the lives of the factory workers, and (4) questions about the product. Each student in a group was to cover one set of questions as his or her contribution to the group. The group as a whole was responsible for presenting their research trail, including what they tried and how it worked (see Appendix A). The groups worked together, gathering information and preparing their presentations, for approximately two weeks.

Posterboards
The students’ first assignment was to communicate what they found through display boards like the one shown in Figure 4–1. Teachers prepared guidelines and rubrics as they began their work. Emphasis was placed on presenting

Figure 4–1  Students create display boards to communicate what they’ve discovered through research.
boards that were visually appealing, that were effective at communicating factual information, and that were able to communicate an overview of what the researchers found. We have included copies of scoring guides, student feedback guidelines, and a sample project calendar in this chapter’s Appendix B.

The Skit
The students were to create a skit that demonstrated areas of both tension and conflict related to the manufacture of their product, but also were to present factual information about the situation. The teachers emphasized, through their scoring rubric, that the students should concentrate on three main areas: communicating facts and information, highlighting areas of tension and conflict related to the manufacture of the product, and involving all members of the group in creating and performing an effective skit (see scoring guide in Appendix B).

Commercials
The third task involved having students create forty-five second commercials for products. The teachers required that commercials contain only factual information and that all of the group members be involved in both the production of and the performance of commercials (see scoring guide in Appendix B).

Presentations
Each of the three classes handled the group presentations differently. Jo Cripps’ class began the project first, “blazing trail” for the other classes. Each group of students in her classes offered all three of their requirements at one time: They would present their display boards, then perform their skit, then close with their commercials. The presentations were spread out over three or four days.

Kristin Nichols’ and Gail Powers’ classes began a week or two after Jo’s class and learned from that first group. Jo’s students actually came in to advise the other two classes, and modeled their boards, skits, and commercials for the students. As a result, Kristin’s and Gail’s students presented their display boards, and wrote scripts for their skits and commercials without actually performing them (due to time constraints).

Teacher Observations and Comments
After completing the unit with their students, the teachers made the following observations—excerpts from conversations with Jo Cripps (JC), Kristin Nichols (KN), and Gail Powers (GP):

1. (KN) The most powerful learning (I think, in retrospect) was the
discussions we had after the presentations. The students had carried out the research, had some knowledge and some questions, and we could discuss what they had found and presented with real knowledge and informed questions. Questions after the presentations got the kids thinking. They’d done the work and now were open to thinking and listening. The kids were relaxed after completing their presentations and lots of information came spilling out. They could talk about what they understood.

2. (All three) This project offers a great opportunity for kids of all skill levels. You couldn’t tell which were the IEP (special education) students or who had really low skills. Many students were really very highly skilled in areas such as research or designing boards, or in oral presentation. They were able to succeed in ways that they normally could not with a traditional, book-centered curriculum. They often surprised their team members with how well they performed.

Kristin related a story about one student who is a young man diagnosed with severe ADHD and also fetal alcohol effect. He stayed involved and kept working throughout the project, worked responsibly and effectively as a member of his team, kept looking for new information, and performed way beyond what we had ever seen from him. When his grandmother came in for her family–school conference, she saw the project boards and said, “Oh, now I know what he was talking about.” He had been telling her he didn’t want to buy Nike shoes anymore and she was not sure why. The project had reached him and he had taken it into his life.

3. (All three) It is crucial to allow sufficient time for the students to develop and practice group skills. This is especially true if this sequence is carried out at the beginning of the year. Group skills don’t just happen. You have to teach them and give the students a chance to practice them, to problem solve when things don’t work out as well as they might. Do not assume the students will be able to get together outside of class. We needed to make sure that we allocated enough in-class time for the students to complete their work. All three teachers encouraged their students to meet outside of class but it wasn’t realistic for many of them.

4. (JC) It was useful to have assigned roles within the groups (archivist, designer, researcher, reporter), to have structure to support the students as they began their work. They sometimes changed roles, or had those roles overlap, but the structure helped them organize their efforts.
5. (All three) We will refer to this project throughout the rest of the year. It is a wonderful introduction to people in other places and to the people who live in them. What is it like in other places, especially those we don’t know much about? How is it similar to and how is it different from the life we know about? What is the connection between the geography of the place and the ways people live, the ways they make their livings, and the ways they relate to the rest of the world? We ask questions about work, about the lives of people and the relationships of their lives and their work in every area we study. The project serves as a touchstone for all of the work we do during the rest of the year, and brings economics into our discussions of geography and history, which is unusual.

6. (KN) The posterboards remain up around the room, which is great for the kids. When someone comes into the room, their attention is usually grabbed by the posters and they gravitate toward them. One of the kids will inevitably jump up and offer a mini-tour of the boards and the project, talking with the visitor about what they did and what they learned.

   The kids also posted valuable resources they had found on the board, and these became common resources for the entire class. There was real excitement across the whole room when a group shared a particularly valuable website they had found, and this sharing really helped build the classroom community.

7. (All three) The research makes it clear to the students why what happens in other places does matter to us in the United States. The issue of interdependence—the ways in which we depend on each other around the world—is clearly brought out. Why can we have bananas and coffee in the morning, in Seattle, in December? What does that mean, and how does that happen? We talked about that in class.

8. (KN and GP) The teachers staggered the project across the three classes, with one class going first. This meant that the other two classes could benefit from the experiences of the first class. Students from the first class were able to coach fellow students from the second two classes, which meant that those students had to organize their knowledge and figure out how to teach it—a great teaching tool. They said things like, “It’s hard and you can do it. Here’s what we found was useful . . . , and here are some dead-ends that we found that maybe you can avoid.” And, “This resource is really cool!”
9. (KN and GP) Give visual models of what the posters should look like, or at least what is expected so that there is a clear target. It was very important for the students to have a clear picture of what the target was, of what was expected, and both of us found it very helpful when Jo’s students came in to share their completed posterboards. (None of the teachers wanted to present such a strong example that it would certainly be copied, but the students needed to know what they were aiming for with their projects.)

10. (All three) There are some groups that will struggle with this project. Make sure there are ways to support those students, either within the class structure or outside of it. We used instructional assistants to spend extra time with certain students and groups, and it was important to do so. Also know that some students may not successfully complete the project, but they can still learn from the work of their classmates and from their own efforts.

11. (All three) Parents have said that their students’ thinking has changed as a result of this project. They are going through the house looking at labels, and looking at labels as they shop. Even those who are buying the same products (sneakers, for example) are not doing so thoughtlessly. All agree that it has changed the way they look at the world, and changed the conversations they have at school. The Summit classes will be sharing what they have learned from the product research project with the rest of the school via a displaycase presentation, featuring their posterboards and explanations of what they did and what they discovered.

Follow-up Projects

*Summit Classes’ Projects*

The students in Kristin’s class took what they have learned and shaped it into newspaper articles and editorials. They were studying the various forms of writing that appear in newspapers, and working to understand the ways in which newspapers are put together; this project offered them content to use. Some played with the notion of writing from a U.S. point of view while others wrote from within the country in which the various manufacturing efforts were actually carried out, exploring the notions of context and point of view and how these affect the stories we read and write. We’ve included a sample of student stories in Chapter 5.

Students in all three classes read and responded to an article that appeared in *The Nation* magazine—“The Shame of Meatpacking” by Karen Olsson (16 September 2002, pp 11–15). The assignment read as follows:
Assignment: You are to read the article and write a reflection paper. Please think of the following questions:

• How do the issues that the meatpackers face compare to the issues in your PRP factory? What are the similarities and differences?
• Explain the role of unions in the meatpacking industry. How do they influence change?
• What changes might we see if unions were allowed in your PRP factory?
• What personal reactions do you have to this article?

Form: Minimum one-page reflection, typed, due December 9

Jo’s class joined the National Labor Committee for Worker and Human Rights list (see www.nlcnet.org) and became involved in an ongoing letter-writing campaign aimed at the Disney Corporation. The campaign urges Disney to return to a factory they had abandoned when workers demanded better pay and working conditions. Jo’s students sent letters to Michael Eisner, the CEO at Disney, urging him to “do the right thing,” and to respect the rights of those women who manufacture Disney products. A sample letter is shown in Figure 4-2.

A School Display

The three classes are planning to offer a visual display/report about their research projects and findings to the rest of the school. They will organize their posterboard presentations, newspaper articles, letters, and other work into a display that will be featured in the school’s main floor display case, visible to the entire student community and to visitors. They felt it was important to share what they had found with others, and this seemed an effective way to do that.

Extensions

Connecting to Language Arts—A Day in the Life

This lesson, described briefly in Social Studies at the Center (Lindquist/Selwyn 2000), builds on the research done in tracing the pathway of different products. The instructions for the assignment are very simple: Students are to write a story about someone who lives in the town in which their product is manufactured. They are to tell the story of a person in this location during a typical day:

• What is their home like, and who lives in it?
• What might they do at the beginning of their day?
• What will they see, hear, smell as they walk (or bike, or drive) down the street?
• What foods will they eat?
• What games or amusements will they find?
• Will they spend any time relaxing?
• What work will they do during the day?
• What will they do after work?

December 13, 2002

Mr. Michael Eisner
Chief Executive Officer
Walt Disney Company
500 South Buena Vista Street
Burbank, California 91521

Dear Mr. Eisner,

My name is Dharma S. I go to Summit, a school in Seattle. Our class has been studying up on sweatshops, and companies like Disney. You probably already knew that what you do is sometimes wrong, but since you haven’t changed you need to be told again.

I’m twelve, I’m only in the seventh grade, I already can tell right from wrong. What you do is wrong. I am talking about the Shah Makhdum factory and how you pulled out just when they decided to respect human rights. Yeah, surprise, they’re humans too.

What I want to know is how you can do that to people and still respect yourself. Sure you’ve got money and cars but what about self-respect? Money can’t do that for you. I’m not all religious but the Bible says some stuff that makes sense, like treat others how you would like to be treated. You should try it.

I got on the Internet and checked out a couple sites about sweatshops. Your name came up a lot. What you did to the Shah Makhdum factory was dirty. Can’t you bear to treat humans like humans? People care a lot about what you do, maybe if you change others will follow your example. Set the standard.

Mr. Eisner, I ask you to do the the right thing. You know what it is. Reemploy the Shah Makhdum factory. The people will love you for it, and you will respect yourself for it. Think it all over.

Dharma S.

Figure 4–2 Inquiry leads to action.
Students can base their character on a real person, or they may entirely make up a person. Clearly, they will have to imagine some things about their character, though it should be based on as much information as they can find about the place in which their product is made. The story should be no more than three pages in length, and students should not worry about creating a riveting, exciting script. Their task is to help us to get a feel for the place so that we would recognize it should we arrive there.

The following are some handy hints for carrying out this assignment:

Read a number of picture books that take place in distant locations. Ask the students the kinds of things that the author and illustrator had to know in order to write the book. *The Day of Ahmed’s Secret* (Heide/Gilliland 1990) is a wonderful example of such a book. It is a gentle and unspectacular story of a boy’s day in Cairo, and carries with it a great deal of information about the city, and about the culture of at least some of the people who live in that great city.

Have the students prepare an hourly chart to serve as an outline. They can mark their character’s day hour by hour and make brief notes about what he or she might be doing at that hour. They can fill in the chart and then decide what to write about to give us the best picture. If they are at work for eight hours, students don’t have to give us an hour-by-hour account of their time in the factory.

Students can practice on themselves by keeping a log of what they do during the day, seeing if they can tell someone about their day. This exercise is actually interesting and useful for the students so that they see where their time actually goes.

Have the students ground their writing in the senses. Tell us what the character might see, hear, smell, taste, touch as he or she moves through the day. Who might they see? What might they hear as they step out of their house or apartment? What would they smell cooking at home or next door? What kinds of clothes would they be wearing or see on others?

Have the students share their stories and enjoy them.

*Who Are We in Our Community?*

One set of extensions to this assignment has at its heart the community in which you are teaching. Students can research the kinds of questions they asked about the communities in which their product is manufactured. What kinds of work do our parents and/or guardians do? What kinds of work goes on in our community? Where does our food come from? Where do our hous-
ing materials come from? What kinds of jobs were needed at the time of our grandparents or great-grandparents, and who did them and what was that like? How are the same jobs handled today? Are there some jobs that have no equivalent today, like the iceman who delivered to families before refrigerators became common? How did our families come to this community, and what role did jobs play in those moves? How have the communities in which we live changed as the economic health of the communities changed? What do children in your town do on a typical day? What do children in the various towns you researched do on a typical day?

_A Note of Caution:_ Know that this question (and any questions that involve families) could be difficult or embarrassing to some students. For a variety of reasons, a few students and/or families may not want to share anything about their lives; perhaps a child is homeless and doesn’t want classmates to know. There may be family issues or problems that they’d rather keep quiet, and families who simply prefer privacy. Respect that, and help them find other, related research tasks to carry out.

**Does the Community Manufacture Something to Send Elsewhere?**
A potent variation of this lesson simply reverses the direction of your exploration. You and your students investigate a product that is made locally and shipped somewhere else in the world. What can you and your students learn about the process, up to and including learning about the people and place(s) that import the product? The same range of questions would be appropriate, with a local focus, for example, linking the local climate to the materials used in assembling the product in question.

The product you investigate is, of course, absolutely dependent on what happens in your town. It’s probably not the best idea to look to something as large and diverse as Microsoft products (a local company in the Puget Sound area) or a Boeing airplane because it’s too complicated. Take something relatively straightforward and small enough to be manageable as a research topic (though if you and your students want to take on Boeing, have at it).

Fewer and fewer items are manufactured in the United States, and there may be some locations that no longer manufacture anything. Another option for this assignment can be to investigate the manufacturing history of your own town. Identify a now-vacant factory building and investigate what used to be manufactured there. Use the same set of questions, adapted slightly to be historically appropriate. The further work might be to explore the reasons for the town losing the factory, and the impact that loss has had on the community.

Detroit is an example of a city that has been devastated by the loss of manufacturing businesses. Once known as the Motor City, there are now fewer
than 5,000 manufacturing jobs in Detroit’s entire metropolitan area. The big three car companies have even moved their headquarters outside of the city limits, and no major plants are still in operation. Detroit is now a virtual ghost town from an economic point of view, with no major chain stores within the city limits. The blue-collar economy that was the backbone of the city is all but gone.

Trace the same sequence through history. Assume that you and your students have just researched the current pathway bringing Barbie and Ken dolls to the United States from their points of manufacturing overseas. What could you learn next about the manufacture of dolls fifty years ago, or one hundred years ago? Did they exist? What were they made of and where did those materials come from? Who designed and owned the production? Who made the dolls, and how did they get to market (were they in a market)? How much did they cost, and how much did they cost to produce? Who owned them and who played with them?

You are basically asking the same sequence of questions as in the original assignment, recognizing that the question—“How will they be made fifty years from now?”—is the question you answered in the original assignment. You can go back one hundred years or one thousand, for that matter, if appropriate.

What Do We Eat and How Does It Get Here?

Another category of related assignments centers on food. Students can trace the path an item of food, from the field, plantation, woods, or stream to their kitchen. The same general frame, or outline of guiding questions, presented earlier in this chapter applies to this assignment. Use the following list as a starting point for a food project.

• Where is the food item grown?
• What is the climate and geography of this location?
• Who grows the food? What is involved in that process?
• How have conditions changed (or not) in this process over the years? Who owns the process?
• If the food is grown on plantations, who owns the land? When did that happen? What happened to those who used to own the land?
• What are the lives like for those who grow the food?
• How does the food get from the growing site to the United States? How is the food transported and kept from rotting?
• How does it get from the port of entry to your town, store, and kitchen?
• What does it cost to grow the product? How much do the workers make?
• What does the product sell for in the store? How much is profit?
• Where did we buy the food fifty years ago, or did we buy the food at that time?
• What technologies have come into play?
• What environmental issues are associated with the growing of the food?
• Have there been land use issues around this crop: people forced off land, etc.?

The youngest students do not need to deal in the politics, sociology, and geopolitical complications of the food production process; they can simply find where their breakfast foods come from and, generally, how they get to their kitchens.

Older students can take on the more complex issues surrounding food, from land use to environmental concerns, to the use of the military to maintain plantations and profit in Nicaragua (or Hawaii . . .) over the past 100 years. There are also issues of immigration, population shifts, soil erosion, cultural and social consequences of this major change in the local economy and society. What happened when the different cultural, ethnic, and racial groups came together? How have those changes come down to us today?

A Local Variation
A local investigation can involve having younger students simply trace a local food from the fields (or streams) to the local market. The class can travel to a farm (if you have one) and see what the crop looks like in the field, then find it in local markets. (I’m not including cows to hamburger in this, though you could.)

Jake’s Conscience
Kristin Nichols had an interaction with one of her students that exemplifies what we hope will happen.

About four or five days after starting the Product Research Project, Jake, a leader in my class in both citizenship and academics, looked disengaged and not productive in the product research. I took him aside and asked him why he wasn’t helping his team with the research. He responded, “Kristin, don’t take this personally, but this just isn’t very exciting.” Jake continued to explain that “learning about geography and how things are made just doesn’t interest me very much.”

My response to Jake (with a smile on my face) was, “Jake, it is time that you developed a social conscience.”
His response (with half of a smile) was, “I have a regular conscience, isn’t that good enough?”

“No, Jake, at fourteen years old, you need to start developing a strong social conscience.” Jake just shook his head, grinned at me, and headed off to his group to work.

A few days later, when I saw Jake on his way down the hall, I asked him how his social conscience was coming along. He became excited and told me that his father had taken him out to buy new basketball shoes and that he spent most of the time looking at the labels: “I kept thinking about where the shoes were made and who was making them.”

“Did you buy the shoes?” I asked him.

“I had no choice. I couldn’t find anything that wasn’t made somewhere else,” responded Jake.

Not much else was said about Jake’s developing conscience until the last week of the project when Jake came barreling through the doorway and started wagging his finger at me, accusing me of “messing with his mind.” He proceeded to tell me that he had gone home and looked through all of his clothes and shoes to see where they were made. I smiled at him and said, “Congratulations, you are starting to develop a social conscience!” He smiled back and said, “Thanks.”

Jake continued with the project and led his team to producing an informative project on Fubu shoes made in China.

Resources


**Websites**

www.childlabor.org/links/—Extensive links to various websites dealing with child labor.

www.freethechildren.org—Organization started by Craig Kielburger that organizes children to work for children’s rights around the world

www.maquilasolidarity.org/campaigns/nike/notmachinespr.htm—“We Are Not Machines”

www.nlcnet.org/resources/wages.htm—Apparel wage pricing sheet

www.nlcnet.org—The National Labor Committee for Worker and Human Rights

www.north-coast-xpress.com/~doretk/Issues/00-06%20SUM/madein.html—Made in USA Sweatshops

www.transnationale.org/anglais/enquetes/enquete2.htm—Sweet Honey in the Rock’s song, “Are My Hands Clean”

**Videos**

*Maria*, Rage Against the Machine song/video about a young woman who works in a Maquila, a factory in Mexico where workers, often under deplorable working conditions, manufacture and assemble goods for export.


Appendix A

Learning Guidelines/Information Sheet

Group Information Sheet
• Our group members
• Our product
• Our reasons for choosing it
• Our game plan (at least seven specific steps)
• Three important due dates along the way

Guiding Questions
You should come up with six questions to be answered, in written form, as part of your group’s presentation.

THE COUNTRY
• In what country was your product made?
• Where is this country located? What is its absolute location? Its relative location?
• What is it like in this country? What is the climate of the region? What grows there?

THE PEOPLE
• How do people live their lives in the country where your product is made?
• What are their beliefs? Their customs? Their values?
• How do these people govern themselves?
• What is their economy like?

THE FACTORY
• Who owns the factory where the product is made?
• Who manages the factory?
• What impact has the factory had on the place where it exists?
THE FACTORY WORKERS

• Who works in the factory?
• Where do the workers come from?
• How did they get their jobs?
• What is their job like? Describe their workday.
• If they weren’t working in this factory, how would they be earning a living?
• What other jobs are available where they live?
• How much do the people get paid for their work at the factory? At other jobs that are available?

THE PRODUCT

• Who designed it?
• Who is expected to buy it?
• How much does it cost to make the product?
• How does the product get from the factory to the place where it is sold? (Get as much information as you can about the product’s journey from source to store.)
• Where would the product have been made 100 years ago?
• Why was the product made far away from the place where it’s sold?
• What is the connection between the store where the item is sold and the factory where it is made? Does the store own the factory or is there some other arrangement?

THE RESEARCH TRAIL

• Explain the steps you took to gather information. Phone calls? Interviews?
• What source(s) did you try that did not pan out?
• What unexpected source(s) did you find along the way?
• Be sure to include a formal bibliography.
Appendix B

Rubrics for Research Projects

*Product Report Project Poster Scoring Guide*

**CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION**

Each category is worth 0–5 points

___ The topic—the product! Is obvious at first glance; well portrayed
___ Poster contains at least 7 relevant and fascinating facts about the *product*
___ Contains at least 7 relevant and fascinating facts about the *country*
___ Contains at least 7 relevant and fascinating facts about the *factory*
___ Contains at least 7 relevant and fascinating facts about the *workers*
___ Contains an accurate and attractive map showing the product’s *global* journey
___ Is at least 36-by-48 inches (standard Product Display Board dimensions)
___ Contains at least one relevant, detailed, and attractive diagram
___ All illustrations are thoroughly and accurately captioned
___ Craftsmanship is professional (no pencil marks, glue residue, visible tape, etc.)

*Total* (out of 50 possible points): ___________  
Due date: ___________

*Product Research Project Performance Scoring Guide*

**CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION**

Each category is worth 0–10 points

The Written Script

___ Ideas and content—at least 20 relevant facts are embedded in the script
___ Central conflict is relevant, thoughtful, and well developed
___ Conventions (capitalization, punctuation, grammar) are of publishable quality

The Oral Presentation

___ Skit runs 3–5 minutes
___ All parts are perfectly memorized
___ Actors share equally in stage time (no stage hogs, no “ghosts”)
___ All actors remain in character throughout the play; all are emotionally engaged; all are costumed appropriately

Total (out of 70 possible points): __________

Product Research Project Commercial Scoring Guide

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION
Each category is worth 0–10 points
___ Runs 30–45 seconds
___ All product information is true
___ Conventions are of publishable quality

Total (out of 30 possible points): __________

Student Feedback Guidelines
Each student is to fill out feedback forms for the presentations they witness. The focus should be on what you have learned from the presentations, what questions you have based on those presentations, and what suggestions you have for the presenters about how they could make their presentations better. Place your comments on the three-by-five cards you will be given before each presentation.

Sample Project Calendar
Here is one teacher’s day-to-day calendar as it actually played out. Jo was quick to point out that it is impossible to plan the speed at which the unit will play out since it depends on the students’ abilities to track down useful information, the speed at which their phone calls or emails are returned, and other factors beyond teachers’ control. All three classrooms did complete the project during a three-week period.

JO’S CALENDAR:

Sept 25: Introduction of the project—product research project (PRP)
Sept 27: Assigned groups; teacher-chosen
Sept 30: Visit to school library for lessons on how to use Proquest and how to work with Seattle Public Library research materials. Students also learned how to bookmark websites. They presumably have had these skills
but needed lots of reminders. The librarian was present for the introduction to the project and is really into it.

Sept 30 also: Students get six questions for their three-person groups; each student has two questions to answer. The questions come from the longer list presented in Chapter 4.

Oct 1–3: Class brainstorms list of possible resources (including the ones suggested here). Class works through group expectations. (This was very difficult for the kids to complete because it was their first group experience of the year.)

Students made job lists: archivist, who keeps track of the papers; director of research, who is willing to line up and make phone calls, among other tasks; designer, who takes charge of how to put it all together. They are all journalists.

Group is charged with compiling a beginning game plan of how they will proceed.

Oct 2: For two days, kids worked on their group jobs and game plans.

Oct 3: Team time in class; then Sweet Honey in the Rock’s song, “Are My Hands Clean.” Students read and discussed the lyrics and traced the path of the lyrics on a map.

10/8: Class watched Mickey Mouse Goes to Haiti, a video that was moderately successful; then the students had workshop time.

10/9: Class watched Zoned for Slavery video, which was very effective. The kids took the best notes they’ve ever taken and were very moved by it.

10/10: The students had workshop time; it took some of them a long time to select their products.

When Jo asked one student why she selected Nike sneakers for her product she replied that it was because she loved Michael Jordan (as if Jordan made the sneakers). This led to an extensive and wonderful discussion about the ways products are advertised and the reasons that students decide what is in and what they will buy.

10/10: “Rage Against the Machine” song and video Maria, about a young woman who works in a maquiladora.

10/11: Collected their six questions . . . factory information was very difficult to track down.

10/14: Began to plan their posters and skits; two-hour block day.

10/17: Workshop; students also watched a short segment from the video,
When Children Do the Work. This video had to do with the rug makers in Pakistan, and the story of Iqbal Masih, a twelve-year-old worker who escaped and traveled the world, talking about the enslavement of children going on in the rug industry until he was assassinated. Iqbal and working conditions in Pakistan took a few days to discuss. Rugs and soccer balls were the products receiving the most attention.

10/21: Students presented their posters; the weekend before was a very significant time—many groups actually met outside of class and made great strides.

10/25: More posters were presented, and groups rehearsed their skits (they were supposed to present but were not ready).

10/27: Skits were completed.

Follow-up activities are being carried out. There are letter-writing campaigns—to corporations, telling them why they won’t be buying their products anymore; to parent groups and school officials saying why the students don’t want to use Nike equipment anymore; and to newspapers. Several students participated in the national “Buy Nothing Day,” an educational action carried out on the day after Thanksgiving—the busiest shopping day of the year.
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