GETTING SMART ON

BLENDING MIDDLE GRADE HUMANITIES

Introduction

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Beyond Traditional Silos: Connecting Humanities to Real World, Deeper Learning, & STEM

Excellent reading and writing skills form the foundation of content work in the humanities. And the humanities' breadth—the arts, theater, philosophy, religion, ethics, world languages—makes it easy to see how the humanities cross over into so many other content areas. Here in particular we can think about the impact strong reading skills can have in a math course, or the impact that strong writing skills can have in a science class. The humanities and STEM really do go hand in hand (hence the increased emphasis on STEAM). We also see this content integration throughout schools that incorporate Deeper Learning and Project-Based Learning as foundational approaches to learning.

As we continue to create technological solutions to problems we seek to solve—for social justice, for increased opportunity for all, for commerce—we certainly need a strong background not just in STEM fields but also in the humanities. For example, Apps For Good allows students to create apps that help make a difference. Specifically the program calls for teaching coding "to empower students from all backgrounds to seize the opportunities of our digital age and create solutions to the problems they care about, using technology." This is a great example of the connection between the humanities and the work happening in the IT world.

We know this connection happens in many areas of the real world, and there are excellent blended approaches featured in this collection that allow students to make these sorts of connections across content areas. In other words, there are no silos or containers for knowledge. As one middle school teacher said of using Big History Project in class, "The students learn that all knowledge is truly connected."

In this collection, you will read more about the basics and why they still matter. Programs such as Read 180 and Literacy Design Collaborative are highlighted. You will also see how some blended courses and programs such as Big History Project are using content to span multiple disciplines. (In the case of Big History, the curriculum can be taught as World History or Science, or both; it can be used online or on paper; it can be

personalized by the student for further exploration; and it can be personalized by the teacher designing the course for his/her students).

What does this mean for the middle grades in humanities? If we follow the four tenets of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, then we want to ensure that:

- Learning is Personalized.
- Learning is Competency-Based.
- Learning Happens Anytime, Anywhere.
- Students Take Ownership Over Their Learning.

This means looking beyond the traditional silos in our standard American school system to integrate concepts of Deeper Learning, Project-Based Learning, real-world learning, and to ensure a high degree of personalization. We embed competency-based learning in our schools and assess students on depth more than breadth. We allow students to pursue their interests and their passions, not just as an aside, but in real and meaningful ways connected to a deeper sense of who they are and their own learning.

If a student is interested in the theater, world languages, philosophy, world religions, graphic design, dance, painting, playing a musical instrument, creative writing, poetry, filmmaking, digital storytelling, culinary arts or other creative endeavors, then we allow for those to be front and center in the classroom. We validate those experiences as legitimate interests. We find ways to incorporate them and we allow students to explore. We allow for the integration that adults experience in the real world.

This collection will discuss the basics, which include blended and engaging approaches to reading and writing. This collection will also go beyond the basics to create a rationale for student-centered learning across the humanities at a critical age: the middle grades.

Using Blended Tools to Maximize Instructional Time

Authored by Tom Vander Ark, founder and CEO of Getting Smart.

Since the invention of the modern high school with courses and credits, students have struggled with the literacy demands of challenging coursework. Failure in content areas resulted in the requirement to repeat the course. Widespread failure resulted in massive dropout rates.

Based on over twenty years of research, READ 180 was developed to assess, differentiate and quickly boost literacy skills so that struggling students could achieve success across their coursework. The program is designed to meet the instructional needs of teachers while helping students meet the rigorous expectations of the new Common Core State Standards and experience success on the corresponding new assessments.

Often deployed in a rotation model, the READ 180 program supports four instruction strategies:

- Whole-Group Instruction. Teachers use knowledge- and vocabulary-building strategies and exemplary texts for students at multiple levels.
- Small-Group Learning. Using adaptive software, students practice close reading of texts, gathering evidence and sharing their understanding and knowledge through a variety of research and writing tasks.
- Modeled and Independent Reading. Students engage with a wide variety of literature and informational texts; educators monitor student progress toward independence with complex, grade-level texts.
- Adaptive Learning. The software provides students with individualized practice in reading, spelling, vocabulary and writing.

In a single period, READ 180 is often used on an A/B schedule. The first day is kicked off by 20 minutes of whole-group instruction followed by about 30 minutes of one station with a quick whole-group wrap-up. The second day includes two station rotations with a whole-group wrap-up. Over the course of two days, students experience all four literacy modalities.

READ 180 can also be used in a double period where students experience all four modalities daily. Napa Valley Unified School District experienced big literacy gains between 2011 and 2012 using a 90-minute block.

For struggling students, READ 180 is often used to complement a traditional English class in a double block. In many station rotation models, students experience a disjointed instructional program where the components are not well-integrated. READ 180 solves the integration problem by drawing data from multiple assessments. Curriculum-embedded and criterion-referenced assessments provide real-time feedback and allow educators and students to track literacy trajectories toward college and career readiness. Students are able to practice next gen assessment items that prepare them for new tests.

READ 180 was blended before we knew what to call it. Implemented with fidelity, the program produces reliably strong gains in literacy rates.

We recently met Cypress-Fairbanks principal Becky Koop at the Rice Education Entrepreneurship Program in Houston. She mentioned having "very good success" with READ 180, so we followed up to learn more.

Last year, Koop opened Pope Elementary in a beautiful new building in a new suburb of Houston. They used Read 180 in a full-class model in fifth grade and an intervention model in fourth grade. Scholastic's System 44 is used in special education and for the most challenged readers in grades 3-12 who are not ready for READ 180.

Before she was at Pope, Koop was principal of Matzke Elementary, a Title 1 school. They used READ 180 in fourth and fifth grade classes with struggling readers—half special education students with a significant number of English language learners.

In both locations she saw significant reading growth—more than a grade level. Some students who had been below grade level and had not passed state tests showed a high pass rate after using READ 180. "It's a great program for students with ADD or ADHD," said Koop. "It is good teaching," she added. "Even if you don't use the READ 180 program, the blended model is great. It would make a great model to run a classroom."

Both elementary schools use laptops to support the station rotation model. READ 180 is also available on iPads with some cool new features. Cypress-Fairbanks uses READ 180 in secondary schools so there's less risk of readers dropping off in middle grades.

"I will be honest with you, I think this is an awesome program," said Koop. "I love seeing kids celebrate their successes; they come to love reading!"

Writing Across the Curriculum with the Literacy Design Collaborative

Authored by Tom Vander Ark, founder and CEO of Getting Smart.

The Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC) describes itself as a network of teachers and partners "building out a template-based approach to the literacy demands of college and the workplace, as defined by the Common Core State Standards." The concept is to give teachers tools that enable them to transform the Common Core into classroom action by providing the literacy resources to build students' college-ready literacy skills through their existing content lens.

Chad Vignola, most recently of New Visions for Public Schools, recently took over as Executive Director with the charge of making LDC a sustainable enterprise. The LDC has roots in Vicki Phillips' experience as a local and state superintendent in Pennsylvania. The guidebook to LDC, written by Marilyn Crawford, Stacy Galiatsos and Anne C. Lewis, explains that the LDC "allows teachers to build content on top of a coherent approach to literacy."

LDC is not a lesson plan library. It's a framework that helps teachers across the curriculum promote standards-based literacy. The LDC approach starts with a task, usually a writing prompt, that asks secondary students to take on an important issue (and the complex texts that students must wrestle with to be ready for college.)

Here is an example of a social studies teaching task:
How did the political views of the signers of the Constitution impact the American political system? After reading *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*, write a report that addresses the question and support your position with evidence from the text.

But that's just the start to the tools the LDC framework supplies to teachers to enact the Common Core in their classrooms. There are "default" ladders of instruction that include skill clusters and literacy sub-skill definitions to help teachers plan lessons.

LDC is a "task-central" approach to helping students demonstrate Common Core expectations. Other LDC design principles include:

• Distributing responsibility for reading and writing,
• Connecting reading and writing instruction,
• Fostering a responsive system, and
• Encouraging local choice and being teacher-friendly.

Task templates encourage assignments that ask students to:

• Think in ways that prepare them for success in college and the workplace,
• Read, analyze and comprehend texts as specified by the Common Core,
• Write products as specified by the Common Core, and
• Apply Common Core literacy standards to content (ELA, social studies, and/or science).

"The 'pre-fab' template tasks are intended to respect teachers' content knowledge while scaffolding their practice to, in turn, scaffold student skill acquisition," said Vignola.

Templates include scoring rubrics that support consistent assessment across the curriculum. This is a great approach to enlisting more writing across the curriculum. It would have been useful at the elite private school I visited recently where students did lots of writing but where there was no consistent approach to assessment. Good schools have a common intellectual mission—one that demands writing across the curriculum—and it just makes sense to use a common approach to creating tasks and assessing work.

About 25 states have begun using the LDC, with three planning full integration—Louisiana, California, and Kentucky. The National Writing Project supports this effort to make standards practical.

The LDC provides mostly offline tools, but online tools—albeit rudimentary ones—to support collaboration and knowledge sharing exist on the LDC website, and more are in the pipeline. Useful tools like Edmodo and the Teaching Channel already provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate on Common Core using LDC and other rigorous approaches to making Common Core support our students' success.

If you don't want a scripted approach to writing but want students writing more and better, check out the Literacy Design Collaborative.

Life's Universal Themes Capture Student Engagement

Authored by Bonnie Lathram, Project Manager at Getting Smart.

As educators, we often ponder how we can capture the big ideas in order to create increased student engagement. We recently interviewed two educators who are using Big History Project at their schools to do just that. Big History Project creates opportunities for blended science and humanities coursework to spark engagement and get students thinking BIG about life, the universe, and our interconnectedness to life around us. For more information on Big History Project, see Big History: An Organizing Principle for a Compelling Class, Block or School.

Ridge and Valley Charter School
Traci Pannullo is a curriculum coordinator and leadership team member at Ridge and Valley Charter School in New Jersey. The K-8 charter school's mission is based on ecological literacy. Ridge and Valley's curriculum integrates all of their content. The teachers—called guides—are facilitators, and the school emphasizes collaboration and democratic decision-making processes. The school sits on a 17-acre property, creating almost limitless opportunities for expeditionary and Project-Based Learning.

The premise of the school, says Pannullo, is "looking at human relationships and relationships with the natural world. We look at time from this larger perspective that Big History also takes, as we are all part of this larger story. We discovered Big History and how Big History was bringing these ideas to the school level. This dovetails with our curriculum and the school's mission already."

Ridge and Valley uses Big History in sixth, seventh and eighth grade with five guides (teachers) and 45 students. The five guides work with students for three years, and Big History is implemented over a three-year loop. They incorporate three units each year. Other than a math class, the rest of the day at Ridge and Valley is unscheduled. Students work on content-specific work and projects, and skills are taught within the context of larger projects.

Maplewood K-8
We also interviewed Amy Hiebel, a seventh and eighth grade teacher at Maplewood Parent Cooperative in the Edmonds School District in Edmonds, Washington. Years ago, Amy saw and loved the Powers of Ten video by Ray and Charles Eames, which was first published in 1977. Amy learned that it is part of Big History Project's collection of extensive videos to engage students in the big ideas around science and history. Heibel uses Big History Project across two years in seventh and eighth grade science courses.

A conversation with Big History educators reveals some compelling benefits of this philosophy:

- **Emergence.** Ridge and Valley Charter School focuses on the concept of collective intelligence and emergence, which includes how ideas, culture, thinking, evolution, movement and language all emerge over time.
- **Shifting the paradigm for how students see themselves.** Pannullo said, "We use the story of the universe and the bigger context of time and space to show how we are all interconnected. This is also the larger mission of our school, which is helping us to shift the paradigm for how students see themselves in a larger context."
- **Talking to students about stardust.** Pannullo also said, "At a very young age, we talk about how the kids are all stardust when they are little; these themes are embedded in the way we work with students. By the time they reach middle school, the students' language is fantastic, and the resources have been a great way to focus the efforts."

- **Curriculum expands students' AND teachers' thoughts about our universe.** Hiebel said, "I have a chemistry degree and have been teaching for 25 years. I have seen connections myself that never got before. My seventh graders know all elements up to iron are fused into stars, and my students are getting big ideas of things I did not know when I was their age."
- **Social studies can be married with science.** According to Hiebel, "Big History does a good job explaining the theory of knowledge. How do we know what we know? How have people's ideas about the universe changed over time? The kids are able to look at this from a social studies point of view. I love that it brings in some of the social studies and marries all of that with science."

How does Big History create engagement, teach with the Common Core in mind, flip the classroom, and personalize the learning?

- **Common Core and cross-content collaboration.** Big History is set up to do Common Core well. Students must use primary and secondary sources and write essays on short essay topics. Students all use the same vocabulary. Hiebel said, "In my science class, I am using the same outlines as English and social studies class. We use a three-pronged thesis statement, and each paragraph will have topic sentence, and evidence, and explain the evidence. This brings down the classroom walls. If you work with your teaching partners, what you learn with one subject area helps in other subject areas."
- **Impact on personalization.** The high degree of personalization is a significant factor in the engagement level of students. Pannullo said, "The guides move through the Big History Project curriculum in ways that are meaningful for student projects. We don't necessarily go through a unit sequentially, but rather we look at how it complements our existing curriculum framework. Guides really think through what pieces we need to use or fit best in terms of activities, assessments, articles and other resources. Students can access the different resources themselves, and a high degree of engagement is created." Heibel spoke specifically about students' desires to know more about why they are here, noting that this is of particular interest to students as they are growing and changing in middle school: "All throughout Big History, the content connects back to students. It's interesting to students. Not only is this the story of the universe but also how did you get here?"
- **Learning happens anytime, anywhere.** At Ridge and Valley, there is an expectation that learning happens anytime, anywhere. When concepts or ideas are discussed from Big History Project, students are examining how that concept or idea is also present in their own lives or their own community. As Pannullo said, students realize that the learning "is bigger than what I am learning about in my classroom. Big History is organized in a way that makes students be able to take action. It gets students engaged and encourages critical thinking, and they consider themselves change agents. They engage in action and make a difference."
- **Blended learning.** Heibel said, "Students from the beginning think of Big History as an online community. They have an email and log in. We start off talking about Big History as just another story—a modern scientific story. We talk about origin stories. It is a way for the students who come from a variety of backgrounds to engage in the curriculum. 'This is a story. I don't have to dismiss it, and I can take it or leave it.'"
- **Flipped classrooms.** Heibel went on to speak about how well Big History is set up for a flipped classroom. "There are short introduction videos and questions that go along with it. There are different materials online; students watch a twelve-minute video clip for homework, then discussion, then lab work. There is a really easily available website and the kids navigate it well."

Heibel summed up Big History when she said, "The content is very rich, and the coolest aspect is them learning that all of knowledge is interconnected. Content areas in schools are fake. Knowledge is knowledge. We have created these separations. The kids can see all the content is interconnected. They see knowledge as part of the big story."

Deeper Project-Based Learning

Authored by Tom Vander Ark, founder and CEO of Getting Smart.

Project-Based Learning is a great way to engage students in interest-based activities, but sometimes that's all it is. Good projects are deep, not thin, and rigorous, not easy. Good schools help students frame compelling questions and use standards-aligned rubric assessments.

We've been visiting and interviewing schools that provoke Deeper Learning. They ask students to think and struggle. Larry Rosenstock, High Tech High, likes students (and teachers) to experience a bit of perplexity, often resolved in a focus on production of high-quality products.

We've summarized how digital learning contributes to Deeper Learning, and we think tech-enabled, Project-Based Learning holds great promise to boost college and career preparation. We found three schools that are particularly good examples.

Casco Bay. Principal Derek Pierce said, "We challenge and support our students to become college-ready through our 3Rs: Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships." Casco Bay High School in Portland, Maine, is an Expeditionary Learning school that keeps the school's goals "clear, ambitious and essential: a community of learners where the wonderful in each student is known and nurtured, where learning is catalyzed by student inquiry and academic adventure, and where every graduate is prepared for college, work, and citizenship."

Casco juniors engage in a long-term interdisciplinary project that results in demonstration of learning. Last year, they visited the coalfields of West Virginia. The culmination of this Junior Journey was a multimedia presentation of oral histories.

"Learning expeditions, a central curricular structure at Casco Bay, are founded on the belief that students should and can solve real-world problems while mastering skills and content," said Pierce. "The projects within each learning expedition require students to think critically." He continued, "Communicating ideas is a core component of literacy across the disciplines. For example, science classes have a 'scientific communication' course standard." Pierce noted that all the learning expeditions contain strong writing and presentation elements, each of which uses rubrics to foster strong communication skills.

Learning how to learn, from an Expeditionary Learning perspective, means teaching students to be "meta-cognitive." Reflection and revision, as well as self-assessment against learning targets, are core practices of the Expeditionary Learning design. In each class, teachers use assessment-for-learning practices on a daily basis.

DSST. Bill Kurtz asks two big questions: "What's your view of the human condition?" and "What do people want?" He suggests that most people want to be connected to a bigger story, and they want to be affirmed for their unique gifts and talents.

Kurtz is founder of Denver School of Science and Technology, now DSST: Stapleton High School, the anchor of a Denver STEM network. DSST uses Big History Project, a compelling history of how we got here, as a ninth grade block.

Big History "covers the history of the universe, the planet, and human history," said teacher Jim Stephens, noting that problem solving is the core of their innovative ninth grade curriculum. "Students have to have an understanding of how the earth works in order to decide how humans have interacted with it. They need to look at the history of the problem, and solutions that have been tried or suggested already, before they can try to solve it. This is Problem-Based Learning."

Students may "find it hard at first, but once they start to get it, they really get it, and they start to make connections themselves—often ones their teachers didn't think of," said Stephens. Big History has been the spark for so many other DSST initiatives, including a newly introduced capstone project for the 10th graders to allow them to concentrate a good amount of time on a subject they really care about.

Odyssey. Also in Denver is the Odyssey School, an Expeditionary Learning (EL) school. Executive Director Marcia Fulton explained that Odyssey strives to "harnesses children's natural passion to learn and helps them develop the curiosity, knowledge, skills, and personal qualities they need for successful adulthood."

The school is founded on the philosophy that children learn best through personal, direct experiences designed to take advantage of their natural curiosity about the world. Fulton explained that Expeditionary Learning harnesses children's natural passion to learn and helps them develop the curiosity, knowledge, skills, and personal qualities they need for successful adulthood."

The expeditions that are central to EL are planned backward from guiding questions that require critical thinking. Expeditions "go in depth on important subjects and topics," said Fulton. Students are required to complete significant research and writing and, in order to complete their work, they must address multiple perspectives and form their own opinions regarding politically charged topics such as social progress, access for the disabled, pollution and waste disposal, and educational equity.

Lessons. High Tech High, Casco, DSST, Odyssey and other schools we've studied suggest that to avoid low-level activities and promote Deeper Learning projects, it is helpful to:

1. Pick compelling subjects. Help students frame big but specific questions.
2. Set rigorous goals. Outline high-quality products that will be produced and judged with standards-based rubrics.
3. Make the projects long enough to go in-depth. Build in milestones to keep teams on track.
4. Ask students to publish their work and create venues for presentations of learning to the school community.

Middle Grade Humanities: Going Beyond the English Class

Authored by Bonnie Lathram, Project Manager at Getting Smart.

The middle grades serve as important years for students to immerse themselves in reading and writing across content areas. Schools are increasingly finding ways to create opportunities for students to write and read in content areas that go beyond the English class.

David Ruff joined us for a Google Hangout to chat a little bit about blended, integrated project-based humanities. David is executive director of Great Schools Partnership and leader of the New England Secondary School Consortium (NESSC), a network of high schools in Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont. The network has established a framework with standards that are supported by performance indicators.

Schools within the NESSC are breaking through what used to be traditional content areas and are retooling the curriculum to ensure the learning is more integrated. As Ruff mentions in the chat, learning in the "real world" is much less isolated and more immersive than in traditional silos or content areas. He wonders, "Why we are teaching content areas in such isolation?"

Here are some key ways of thinking about an integrated approach to middle school humanities, and the importance of going beyond the English class.

Competency-Based Learning. The Great Schools Partnership, the NESSC and other organizations such as Competency Works place an emphasis on competency-based, or proficiency-based, learning. The NESSC uses a seven-part definition of proficiency-based learning:
1. Students advance upon demonstration of mastery of content, 21st century skills, and dispositions that prepare them for college and careers.
2. Learning standards are explicit, understood by students, and measurable.
3. Assessments—formative, interim, and summative—measure and promote learning.
4. Demonstration of learning uses a variety of assessment methods, including in-depth performance assessments that expect application of learning.
5. Instruction is personal, flexible and adaptable to students' needs—both initially and as required by ongoing student learning.
6. Students both direct and lead their learning, even as they learn from and with others, both within and outside of schools.
7. Grading is used as a form of communication for students, parents and teachers, not as control or punishment.

By creating and having larger, broader and more thoughtful standards, students can integrate their work across subject areas and can think through big and more complex ideas. The Nellie Mae Education Foundation also has competency-based learning as one of its four key tenets for learning and believes that true mastery should be demonstrated by students rather than moving students forward based on the outdated "seat time" model.

Leadership Is Key. High-quality instructional leadership encourages that humanities are fully integrated across content areas. We know that for any initiatives to be successful in school, we need high-quality school leadership, which includes principals and teacher-leaders. Instructional strategies can expand the learning for students, create opportunities for integration, and include a more holistic approach to learning.

Writing Across the Curriculum. Quality writing is really everybody's job, not just the responsibility of the English teacher. It's important for teachers to share and look at student work together. There are many protocols in place that educators can use when reviewing student work together, and through these discussions, teachers can learn more about what high quality looks like and strategies for providing the most effective forms of feedback to students.

Blended Humanities chat with David Ruff, Bonnie Lathram and Tom Vander Ark. Original blog post featuring Google Hangout.

If you're a teacher who has ever been frustrated after spending hours giving a student feedback on his or her writing only to discover the piece of paper in the trash, you know that finding the most effective ways to give feedback on writing (and ensuring students act on that feedback) is critical. These days, many teachers are turning to cloud-based technology, such as using Google Drive or other digital portfolio options with students, so that students can't "lose" drafts of writing. Students can, however, mark a piece of feedback as "resolved," without making additional changes. Educators could and should encourage students to save multiple drafts of their writing to demonstrate their improvement. These drafts all show evidence of an effective writing process which could be shown at a student-led conference or student exhibition of their learning.

Technology Helps. Technology is a huge assist to improving writing and promoting integration of content. As Ruff said in the Google Hangout, "I don't think that you can talk about personalizing the learning without technology. That is both in terms of instructional and learning strategies and the management of each student's individualized learning plans."

A high degree of personalization will encourage the engagement of students in expanding writing across the curriculum, as well as ensure that middle school humanities extend beyond the English class. In the real world, we read and write in all disciplines. Taking writing beyond the English class showcases how writing is used in real-world settings.

Conclusion

Authored by Getting Smart Staff.

Student-Centered Learning in Math: A Call to Action
The middle grades are a unique time to focus our collective energies on engaging students across content areas. Some of our schools provide an outdated model that constructs knowledge into various silos (i.e., traditional courses or classes). We instead advocate for a shift toward integration of content across courses. Student assessments in this model are not based on "seat time" but instead on mastery of competency in blended and personalized coursework and projects. The middle grades, which are so critical for consistency in engagement and preparation for high school, make for an ideal time to focus on student-centered learning in the humanities in particular. Reading and writing occur in every content area and are vital constructs for acquiring knowledge in high school and beyond.

The Nellie Mae Education Foundation's Four Tenets provide a "call to action" in which we can think about how to integrate humanities in ways that truly are student-centered.

Competency-Based Humanities.
True mastery in the middle grades could include ways for students to demonstrate what they have learned. Students are doing this in middle schools across the United States in a variety of ways. Competency-based approaches can include student-led conferences, student exhibitions and performance-based assessments. All these forms allow students to demonstrate competencies in front of real audiences, answer questions from their peers and adults, and receive feedback in real time on their work. Competency-based approaches in humanities allow for authentic work, giving students a motivation and reason to turn in their "best" work, and they allow for students to see broader connections across content areas. Competency-based learning also inherently requires students to be more reflective about their learning. When students can name not only what they learned but also why they learned it and what they learned about themselves in the process, they are engaged in higher order critical thinking.

Learning is Personalized.
Personalized learning requires that we adjust the pace, adjust the approach, and allow students to bring their own interests and experiences into their work. Blended approaches can assist teachers in making this a reality, and we need more research, high-quality professional development, and sharing of best practices to ensure this high degree of personalization is happening across all of our schools. Rotation models have demonstrated that this can be done effectively (and managed by teachers) to ensure all students are learning in ways that are personalized.

Learning is Everywhere.
We have a vast opportunity to connect the humanities to all learning that occurs everywhere, in school and out of school. Each course, subject area, unit or lesson can be applied to the "bigger picture." Self-exploration and self-learning are naturally emerging at the middle school level, which is an extraordinary time to help students tap into meta-cognitive thinking and encourage them to reflect honestly on their own growth (and struggles) in ways that are realistic and safe.
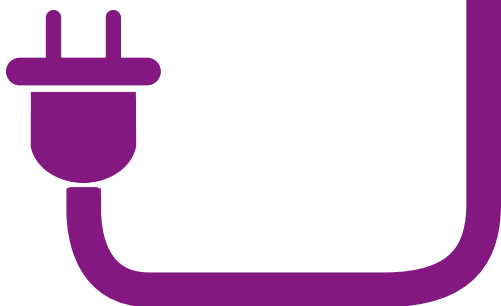
Students Take Ownership Over Their Learning.

Providing students with opportunities to take ownership over their own learning allows for more relevant and engaging learning. Here we should be thinking about a student's connections with his/her teachers, as well as ensuring that we give students opportunities to learn more about their strengths and struggles. Simple report card grades don't necessarily provide the kind of feedback that students need to grow. We can go beyond letter grades and can provide feedback based on competency through the writing of narrative assessments, which help students gather a more realistic self-appraisal and self-confidence about their own academic contributions and personal qualities. That this happens in the middle grades is all the more critical, as it can help fuel success in high school and beyond, where research has shown that students' academic mindset, sense of belonging, and persistence play a huge role in how well they do in school.

Middle Grade Humanities Matter.

Critical thinking skills such as problem solving, communication, taking another's perspective, and knowledge of oneself as a learner are vital skills for students across the middle grades and beyond. The middle grade humanities provide a unique and exciting time to help create and maintain student-centered learning.