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THE NATIONAL PARKS: A COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT

Tom Mulder

When my sister, a first grade teacher, planned a travel unit for her geography and language arts lessons several summers ago, she asked me to pick up as many brochures as I could acquire on my summer vacation travels. The pictures and sales pitches on brochures, she claimed, were to be a motivator, an introduction to her unit. From Denver to Grand Rapids, then Toronto, New York, and the Blue Ridge Parkway as far as North Carolina, I stopped at visitors' centers, freeway rest stops, anywhere that I thought I could nab some free literature. With my own and others' contributions, Ann turned her classroom into a travel bureau for first graders.

This summer she reciprocated: I was planning a research project for my ninth graders on America's national parks, and she was doing the traveling. Travel brochures, I thought, would be an appealing resource as well as a good motivator. Moreover, my sister, a national parks buff herself, had planned stops at Rocky Mountain, Capitol Reef, Zion, Grand Canyon, and Yosemite parks en route to San Francisco. In addition to her materials, I collected newspaper clippings, enough copies of a *Newsweek* special insert for each of my students, over a dozen mailings I'd requested of the superintendents of as many parks, my parents' travel guides to the Smokies and Mount Olympus in Washington state, a wall map of the U.S. national parks, *National Geographic's* regional travel maps, and a couple of road atlases. When fall came, the librarian gathered a cartful of relevant books for my classroom, and I displayed several airline travel posters. My classroom had all the trappings of a travel agency for ninth graders.

The assignment was simple: my students had to plan two-week vacations to their favorite national parks. I randomly divided my classes into groups of two and asked each group to peruse the brochures, maps, books, articles, and pictures to get an idea of which parks they would like to visit, and

then to list their first, second, and third choices. From these lists, I assigned each group one national park; with only one exception, I was able to give each pair its first choice. (I allowed one week in which to change topics, because some national parks—as one pair found with Key Biscayne off the coast of Florida—didn't afford us enough readily-available literature for our project.)

Their assignment consisted of a 12-step process resulting in a day by day itinerary of their vacation. It had to include four key items: (1) a thorough set of directions to outline the most direct travel route to and from their destination; (2) a description of the five or so major sites in the park; (3) a mention of the hiking trails, horseback riding, bicycling, and other recreational opportunities, as well as camping, lodging, and eating facilities available; and (4) a summary of the national park's history. Due dates for notes on these items were scheduled for four consecutive days, beginning one week after I introduced the assignment.

Mapping the travel routes proved to be more of a challenge than I had foreseen. While most groups experienced few problems charting a clear route of major interstates using the maps and atlases that I provided, several had difficulty. One group, en route to the Grand Tetons in Wyoming, inexplicably began by departing Grand Rapids on I-96 east to Detroit, from which they dropped south circuitously to Ohio, finally turning west on Highway 80/90. Another left a major thoroughfare to travel 50-60 miles north and east to Cleveland because one group member had remembered particularly enjoying a rest stop there. Yet another pair meticulously planned its stops for hourly restroom visits.

Students quickly found information about their national parks' major attractions in encyclopedias and library books. I assigned each student to check out and use a book from a local public library. All were able to find books that dealt specifically with the parks themselves or their states or regions. Several students remembered sites that they had seen on recent (and often not-so-recent) trips. Robin, for example, brought a completed photo album of snapshots from her family's visit to Sequoia. Tim had slides from a summer vacation to Acadia. Suzy had snapshots of Yosemite from her elementary years when her family had lived in California.

Listing the facilities and recreational opportunities was also relatively easy. Most students were able to cull an ample list of ranger programs, hiking trails, swimming beaches, fishing spots, campfire programs, visitor centers,

campgrounds, cabins, snack bars, and so on, from the many pamphlets and brochures sent directly from each park. For example, the superintendent of Cape Hatteras had mailed seven resources: An overview of the park itself, which included a map that identified each of its opportunities and facilities as well as major sites; a tabloid newspaper, "In the Park," that noted everything from recreational activities to a tides table; the historic backgrounds of Fort Raleigh and the Wright Brothers National Memorial, two opportunities near the park; a diagram of the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse; and a map of North Carolina's "Bicycling Highways." I left all the pamphlets right inside their envelopes, both so that the students could experience "opening" them themselves, and so that, as letters, these sources of research would look appealing and undaunting. Besides pamphlets, several books outlined the national parks' campgrounds, hiking and horseback riding trails, and other available opportunities, in appendices. Mario and Lee were able to find travel guides as well, published by Mobil and Frommer's, which helped them locate restaurants, hotels, and additional opportunities near their national park. Finally, history notes were drawn from all the sources: pamphlets and brochures, encyclopedias, books, even the *National Geographic* maps.

While the students were researching and taking notes, I took one class period to introduce bibliography. I used the resources that students themselves had brought to write up proper citations for one example each of a book, encyclopedia article, and magazine article. I emphasized the importance of detail, explaining that anyone who wanted to look up a source before traveling to the park should be able to find it quickly and easily. After the one day introduction, I taught bibliography as we went along, working individually with groups to help them jot down the bibliographic information of pamphlets, magazines, and books as I saw the sources being used. Each pair had to use one pamphlet or brochure, map, encyclopedia article, and magazine article or newspaper article, and two books, all of which had to be noted in the bibliography.

When the research was completed, we set about to fuse each pair's notes into one unified whole, a travel plan that clearly described their vacation as though it had actually occurred. To facilitate this, I had each pair arrange the travel routes, campgrounds, hikes, and scenic wonders chronologically, the order in which they were to have been visited. We used past tense verbs and first person plural subjects. In subsequent rewrites, I urged partners to divide their travels into a daily log, using subtitles like "Monday, Tuesday,

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Wednesday,” or “Day 1, Day 2, Day 3.” One group figured out the actual dates that allowed them to visit specific events of this past summer: “August 15, August 16, August 17, 1990.”

One difficulty we faced was determining where to include the parks’ histories. Two pairs were able to locate a visitors’ center or museum in their parks, and they included the history in the description of their visits there. The group that chose Acadia National Park added a sentence or two of background to each of the sites and locations where they stopped. Most simply added a one-paragraph history either beneath the date they arrived at their national park or after their introduction.

As long as their main focus remained on the national park they had chosen, I encouraged groups to pursue related interests nearby. One pair, traveling to Rocky Mountain National Park, did additional research into the costs of skiing at nearby resorts and planned stays at area hotels and lodges. Many planned dining excursions to area restaurants.

When the contents of the reports were completed, we turned to the introductions and conclusions. For the introductory paragraph, I suggested that each group write down their original reasons for choosing the park they did. Many of their reasons were predictable, such as a student’s having visited the park before or a friend’s having recommended it. Others were unique: wanting to spend a night camped on the peak of a mountain in Rocky Mountain, hoping to study the ruins of old frigates along the “Graveyard of the Atlantic” in Cape Hatteras, or visiting Orlando and Disney World on the way back from the Everglades in Florida.

The concluding paragraph had to recommend the highlights of the students’ travels. Many were able to incorporate some descriptive writing in describing majestic mountains, scenic sunsets, and racing tidewaters. A few even added some detracting points: circuitous routes, a “ho-hum” stop at a national monument, or a restaurant to avoid.

A cover page had to be stapled onto the final copy. I had each pair write a one-sentence synopsis of their report on the cover page, along with the title, students’ names, class, and date. The final copy was paper-clipped together with all previous copies, notes, outlines, and any lists or sketches before being submitted to me. Because the papers were organized using day-by-day subtitles, outlines weren’t necessary. I avoided footnotes.

Finally, each group had to adapt its travel plan into an oral presentation, the "travelogue," for the class. The travelogue had to be centered on a visual or aural aid. I encouraged students to read verbatim from their reports while showing slides, a video, a map, or pictures from books and magazines. Several groups used large maps and picture/collages on posterboard to emphasize their travels and highlights along the route. Presenting as pairs and centering the oral report on a visual aid not only emphasized the practicality of the assignment, in that a travelogue is a natural offshoot of a memorable vacation, but also removed some of the pressure of speaking in front of an audience.

As well as the project went this year, I am planning several changes before teaching it again next year. I will hand out a simplified checklist of due dates and an already-printed coversheet with spaces for the title, students' names, class, and the synopsis of the paper's contents. In addition, I will schedule one more day halfway through the researching process to review and reinforce the bibliography format.

Taking a collaborative approach to the research project proffered several benefits to my students. Working within a comfortable social environment, they honed both their social and thinking skills while making decisions, compromising, and sharing tasks in order to accomplish a large assignment. Students learned with and from each other at each step: planning, researching, and writing. They also had the benefit of receiving teacher feedback on their oral and written presentations. The research unit, moreover, didn't take as big a portion of the semester as when assigned individually because pairs "divided and conquered" the research and writing tasks; consequently, we had more time to devote to composition and literature and grammar units. (In addition, my own paperload was cut almost in half.) Finally, the end product's quality was augmented in that it had to rise to the standards of two students instead of just one.

I especially liked the national parks project because it appealed to my "wanderlust" love of traveling. Besides, it removed much of the stigma associated with literary and other more "traditional" research topics; it was accessible to students both because it was familiar and because our high school's library and the local public libraries had many resources to supplement what I already had accumulated. Many of the travel brochures, maps, and other publications were free for the postage needed to write a request, and students enjoyed these alternatives to books. It was a practical assignment—

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working together to plan a trip and then showing others your pictures while explaining its highlights afterwards. After all, part of the excitement of traveling is the planning beforehand and describing afterwards. Finally, it was fun; my students enjoyed the opportunity to “take a vacation” during the school day. When we had finished the project, Bob wondered, “So where do we get to go for our project next year?”

Tom Mulder is a 9th and 10th grade teacher at Grand Rapids Christian High School.