

“That’s Life!”

Mega Skill: Research

Grade Level: 9-12

**Duration: 8-10 class
sessions of research and instruction**

Unit compiled and adapted by Pam Fellingham from research by Dr. Ann Robinson

Rationale: People have always been fascinated by studying other people. From the mathematical genius to the rock star, we are obsessed with success....and yet in a recent speech to Harvard graduates, JK Rawlings focused on failure. During the speech she emphasized the importance for successful individuals to possess the ability to overcome life’s challenges. This includes failure, which she experienced herself. Seven years after graduation, JK Rawlings was as poor as one could be without being homeless. Today she is the best selling children’s author of all time.

According to recent research by Ann Robinson (University of Arkansas), the study of prominent individuals and the study of biographical research traditions exemplify *best practices* in gifted education. This unit will allow the student to examine and explore the rich heritage of biographical methods and the fascinating lives of noteworthy individuals who have overcome challenges and difficulties to become successful.

Measurable Objectives/Standards: (from Scope & Sequence)

By the end of this unit students will be able to:

- Use the media center to find a variety of sources for biographical information.
- Formulate 2-3 clear, answerable biographical research questions.
- Review information sources collected and distinguish between relevant and irrelevant biographical information.
- Judge biographical process and product using multiple criteria.

Essential Questions:

How does a biographer gather information for living subjects?

How does a biographer gather information for deceased subjects?

How is the information about the subject validated?

What criteria should be used to determine the validity of existing biographies?

What criteria should be used to determine the validity of sources?

Materials: The instructor will need access to library resources and student computers. Students should be encouraged to use scholarly sources and search engines recommended by the Blue Valley Library websites. The instructor will need to gather relevant books and periodicals related to the biographical subject or focus.

Hand-outs: No handouts are included, however use of the slide show at the “Get a Life” website (listed in website resources) is encouraged.

Recommended: The instructor should develop a list of essential elements to be included in the student’s project.

Instructional Strategies & Activities:

Working as a group students will:

- Attend an introductory session regarding the importance of the study of biography.
- Attend a session in the library or media center regarding reliable sources and ethical research practices.
- Evaluate an existing list of prominent individuals such as those included in *Cradles of Eminence* or those included in a list of the 100 most influential Americans for the current year.
- Develop a set of criteria to be used in the selection of individuals appropriate for research.
- Brainstorm names of accomplished individuals who meet requirements set by the class.

Working in small groups the students will:

- Discuss the list of names previously generated.
- Use the agreed upon criteria to add or delete names from the list.
- Small groups will report to the class regarding their recommendations, and the large group will make the final decision.

Working individually students will select at least one individual from the list and report to the class regarding:

- Successes and failures exemplified by the selected biographical subject.
- Personal qualities which helped the individual overcome failure and reach a high level of success.
- Methods and resources used in the development of existing biographies
- Validity of the existing resources

Extensions

Students should be encouraged to engage in further studies of accomplished individuals in their fields of interest.

Student Reflection/Evaluation

Teacher directed class discussion following student reports to the class.

Students should self-evaluate the project: What was good? What could be improved?

Resource List:

This unit is based on the work of Ann Robinson: “Get a Life” presentation at the Wallace National Research Symposium on Talent Development, 2008.

Suggested search topics: 100 Most Influential Americans

100 Most Interesting People

Websites:

The Biography Channel.com

"Get a Life! Biographical Methods in Gifted Education", by Ann Robinson

Questia.com

Click2biography

Print Resources:

American Journal of Psychology, Vol.99 No.3 (Autumn 1986) pp. 431-433

Encyclopedia Britannica

Forrest, D.W., "Francis Galton" (1974)

Gardner, Howard, "Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership" (1995)

Goertzel, Victor, "Cradles of Eminence" (2004)

Pearson, Karl, "The Life, Letters, & Labours of Francis Galton", vol. in 4(1914-30)

Appendix

Information included in this appendix is meant to serve as resource information for the instructor.

There are Two Biographical Research Traditions:

Historiometry is a correlation methodology that applies quantitative analyses to archival data concerning historic individuals and events. Sir Francis Galton, a pioneering English eugenicist, popularized Historiometry in his 1869 work "Hereditary Genius".

Case Study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity. The case is sometimes a person and, in many other cases as well, persons are described in depth. The researcher therefore is something of a biographer. Biographers have their methodological choices, and it behooves a case researcher to ponder some of them.

Francis Galton

Information about Francis Galton may be found by researching his studies in eugenics and in the print resources listed in this unit. Francis Galton used historiometry as a method research and sharing the biographical information.

Catharine Cox Miles 1890-1984

Dr. Miles is widely known for her study of eminent historical persons conducted in association with Lewis M. Terman. In 1920 she began work on her doctorate at Stanford. Terman was just starting his longitudinal study of gifted children. She began a complimentary study---a retrospective analysis of the childhood mental accomplishments of 30 historical geniuses. It is an excellent example of Historiometry.

This study in biographical psychology was a successful attempt to determine whether those who had achieved high eminence, by historical standards, had also shown intellectual rigor in childhood. She searched more than 3,000 biographical sources for evidence of intellectual performance that could be scored on the Stanford-Binet. Dr. Cox's

attention to reliability of measurement and validity of evidence has made the study a model of historical and biographical research.

The result was clear: whatever other factors may have entered into the achievement of eminence, high IQ was present for those whose successful careers lay in statesmanship, literature, philosophy, the fine arts, and science, though not in the military realm.

Case Study

Howard Gardner used case study to develop biographical information about subjects of interest. In his book "Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership" he includes case studies such as:

- Eureka & Einstein
- Margaret Mead: Observer of Diverse Cultures Educates Her Own
- Robert Oppenheimer: The Teaching of Physics; The Lessons of Politics
- Robert Maynard Hutchins: Bringing 'The Higher Learning' to America
- Alfred P. Sloan: The Business of America
- George C. Marshall: The Embodiment of the Good Soldier
- Pope John XXIII: Rediscovering the Spirit of the Church
- Martin Luther King: Reprise
- Margaret Thatcher: A Clear Sense of Identity