

***The Family* CURRENT**

Published by Family Learning Organization

Winter 2015

The Project Method

By Mary Hood, Ph.D.

The project method is a companion methodology to unit studies, but it is much lesser known among the homeschooling community. Although many homeschoolers naturally gravitate to doing projects, they often tend to view such projects as “non-academic.” Many mothers have asked me over the years if it was really acceptable to count the hours spent gardening or working on bird feeders as academic work. My answer, of course, is an overwhelming, “Definitely!” Unlike its sister method, the unit study approach, the project method involves less emphasis on integrating a number of subjects into the study. However, it does share certain similarities, such as the emphasis on active learning and its adaptability to several different subject areas. I have personally used the project method most often in the area of science.

One of the chief benefits of the project method is the way it teaches, in a natural fashion, the process of developing ideas, setting goals, making and executing plans, and evaluating progress. These are all necessary things to learn in order to prepare for adulthood and are not usually a big part of traditional education, in which the teachers set the goals and plans and students merely do what they are told.

One of the best projects our family ever did was to create a nature trail behind our house. A wooded area was adjacent to our backyard, and a small trail that the neighborhood children used to cut through to the street behind us was already in existence. We decided to turn it into a nature trail. This involved a good bit of planning on the part of the children, as they determined the basic route and then had to make decisions about what would be the best “points of interest.” In one spot, they put up a sign saying, “Who Lives Here?” at the entrance to a hole in a rotting log. Another signpost was located at “Hood Pond,” which was actually the spot where our water pipe had broken beneath the driveway, but they didn’t know that!

After locating and putting up signage at approximately ten places along the trail, the children then created a “trail guidebook,” which required some creative writing and artwork. They were hoping to impress other neighborhood children enough to motivate them to pay money for the guidebook and tour. Of course, that never developed, and a few lessons on supply and demand economics were also learned along the way.

Other potential projects could include such things as hatching chicken eggs in an incubator, raising worms, building a compost pile, creating a pond in the backyard, creating a wildflower garden to attract butterflies, or simply creating and maintaining a vegetable garden. Birdhouses and feeders or a wide variety of construction projects can also provide suitable means to apply the project method. This type of “education” appeals a great deal to young boys, who are often frustrated by the “sit down and study” type of education that is common in more traditional education.

The typical steps in the project method are as follows:

- Brainstorm about possible projects that you and the children would be interested in doing, and then choose one.
- Set goals together, and discuss some of the reasons that this particular project is worthwhile. Make sure you all have sufficient motivation to follow through!
- Plan the project as much as you can, but allow some flexibility. Sometimes projects wind up taking on lives of their own!
- Determine what materials you will need to execute the project, and either purchase or create them. Be sure to involve children in every step along the way.
- Begin the project. Try to work together as a team. As with most projects, there should be a leader, but tasks should be delegated based on the skills, talents, and interests of each person involved. Consider having one of the children be the “leader” in a project once in a while. It doesn’t always have to be an adult.
- Follow through. Be sure to complete the project. One of the worst things you can do is to continually start projects and never finish them, which teaches the exact opposite of what you are trying to accomplish.

One of the problems I see with a lot of homeschooling mothers is that they love the idea of doing these types of projects but somehow either doubt their ability to follow through or simply feel that they don’t have enough time to do them. In my opinion, these kinds of projects can be even more educational than having the children sit around a table doing bookwork all day. Once children get involved in an interesting experience, they may also read books about the project, write in a journal, keep records, and even use math skills as a natural part of that project. It may be beneficial to set aside more traditional education for a time in order to try something a little different.

Finally, I know that some of us, including me, are much better at thinking, planning, and dreaming about working on projects such as these than we are at actually carrying them out. In Bill Bryson’s wonderful book, *A Walk in the Woods*,¹ which talks about his experiences on the Appalachian Trail, he writes about the two people most responsible for the building of the trail: Benton MacKaye and Myron Avery. He describes MacKaye as a “well-meaning visionary.” Bryson stated that nothing happened for quite a while after MacKaye came up with the original idea, because “MacKaye occupied himself with

refining and expanding his vision until he and it were only tangentially connected to the real world.” It was Avery who took over, mapped the trail, located volunteers, personally supervised its construction, and walked every inch of the 2,000-mile trail himself. Thinking and dreaming are great, but until you start to actually do a project, not a whole lot will be accomplished!

When used correctly, projects can add spice to your curriculum or even constitute the bulk of your educational efforts. They can involve and inspire those who are resistant to bookwork and provide a framework for the use of books and writing experiences. They can be used as additional exercises to supplement unit studies or provide a break from more structured experiences. Above all, they can teach effective goal-setting, planning, executing, and evaluating skills in a natural, family-centered environment, which will not only help your children prepare for adult life but also will give you the gratification of knowing you can come up with interesting projects and follow through until they are completed.

Endnote:

1. Bryson, Bill, *A Walk in the Woods*, Random House, 1998, pp. 38–41.

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“Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.”
~ Aristotle

BOOK REVIEW by Martha Bereiter

'*Endurance: Shackleton's Incredible Voyage* by Alfred Lansing' is a book I highly recommend. It is especially suitable during these long winter months that are so dark and cold. What 28 men survived in the Antarctic makes our winters seem mild!

When I first heard of this book I wondered what could be so amazing about an Antarctic explorer. Winter is not my favorite season and we typically get six inches of snow where I live. How wrong I was! I started reading this book to my children in the evenings before bed. We all became mesmerized and couldn't wait for the next chapter!

Shackleton's amazing feat of being trapped in the ice, watching his ship sink, leading his men through two Antarctic winters, and the incredible voyage to Elephant Island and St. George Island is better than any fiction. It is an extraordinary account of an epic struggle to survive.

This book has led me to read everything I can find about Sir Ernst Shackleton. The most recent was '*Chasing Shackleton: Recreating the World's Greatest Journey of Survival* by Tim Jarvis.' This is the story of three men who in 2013 set out in an authentic replica of one of the life boats from the *Endurance* ship, the *James Caird*. They set sail from Elephant Island to St. George Island and then proceeded to follow Shackleton's trek over St. George.

Other books about Shackleton available at www.coolantartica.com:

South with Endurance: Shackleton's Antarctic Expedition 1914-1917 by

Frank Hurley

Shackleton's Boat Journey: The Narrative from the Captain of the Endurance by Frank Worsley

South: The Endurance Expedition by Ernst Shackleton

Shipwreck at the Bottom of the World: The Extraordinary True Story of Shackleton and the Endurance by Jennifer Armstrong

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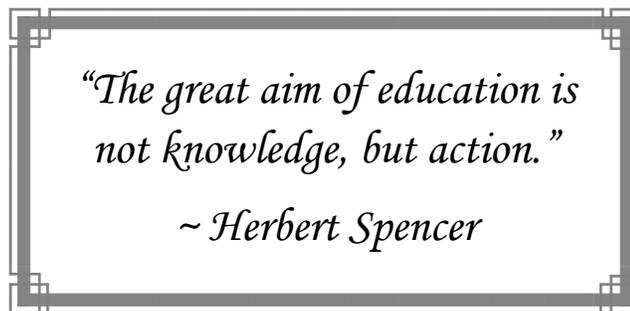
(NOTICE: As of January 1, 2015 WA customers will pay sales tax on test preps and shipping costs associated with them. Tax rates can be found on the WA Dept. of Revenue website: <http://dor.wa.gov>.)

ASSESSMENTS*

Checklist (CSL) K-12	\$30.00
Freestyle (FAF)	\$30.00
(No S&H charge on these items)	

*These reports are completed by parents and evaluated by a Washington State certified teacher to document the child's academic progress according to state standards.

If you are unsure of the homeschooling laws in your state, go to www.hslda.org or www.homeedmag.com for specific state information.



KID'S PAGE

CREATIVE WRITING IDEA #1:

Imagine that it's a "marshmallow world." What if everything around you were made of marshmallows? **What** would it be like to walk on marshmallows, sit on marshmallows, and ride on marshmallow cars? **Write** a story about living in a "marshmallow world." Make some marshmallow snowmen, too!

CREATIVE WRITING IDEA #2:

Imagine that you are a snowman. **What** would that feel like? What would a day in your life be like? What fun adventures might you have? **Write** a story about your adventures as a snowman!

CREATIVE WRITING IDEA #3:

If you could give a special gift to a boy, girl, man, or woman, what might it be? **Why** would you choose that gift, and who would be the lucky recipient of your gift? **Describe** the gift you might choose and the person who would receive it.

Send us your stories and artwork! We would love to see them, and you might be featured in a future newsletter! You can send them by mail or email to: homeschool@familylearning.org.

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BOOKS

Academic Homeschooling: How to Give Your Child an Amazing Education at Home - Tracy Chatters

Suddenly Homeschooling: A Quick Start Guide to Legally Homeschool in 2 Weeks - Marie-Claire Moreau, Ed.D.

Learning Styles: A Guide for Teachers and Parents - Barbara K Given

A Child's Garden: Enchanting Outdoor Spaces for Children and Parents - Molly Dannenmaier

ONLINE RESOURCES

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www.time4learning.com - economically-priced curriculum

www.kaboose.com - free lessons and craft projects

www.mentoringminds.com - books & CDs to purchase

www.lessonplanspage.com - math worksheets & science projects

www.patchproducts.com - educational games

www.besthomeschooling.org - articles about homeschooling

www.homeschoolfacts.com - state laws and support groups

www.schoolexpress.com - free lessons and membership for a fee

www.lessonplancentral.com - free lessons

www.applelandbooks.com - test practice and study guides

If you have found a particular book or resource to be helpful,
and it is not on this list, please send it to:
martha@familylearning.org.

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