

# Two Other Topic-Finding Jump-Starts

- **FREE WRITING.** When we want to help students look for and commit to a topic, we can begin by modeling our own free-writing process. In one Colorado classroom, Steph recently demonstrated this for a class of fifth graders. Composing on an overhead transparency (or on a projected computer) so all can see, she launches into about ten minutes of free writing on a topic of some interest and concern to her—in this case, the situation in Tibet. She does this writing out loud, opening up and narrating her thought process as she works. “I need an opening sentence that will grab my readers” and “Hmmm, maybe I should introduce the Dalai Lama here. . . .”

The big payoff comes when kids do their own ten-minute free writes, probing their own internal, even unconscious, concerns, questions, or curiosities. Usually kids come out of this activity with sharper, more narrow, and researchable topics than they would with simple brainstorming or listing. Just as with the negotiating process Smokey uses, the teacher helps the kids to really dig deeper, to surface and weigh potential topics with care—to ensure engagement and sustainability for the long run. And that takes time, modeling, and plenty of talk.

- **JOURNALS.** As we discussed in the book, many teachers encourage their students to keep a “wonder book” or journal where they get in the habit of jotting down questions that pop up in life. In Steph’s notebook, she had practical questions about cars, detergent, whitening strips, and more. In Smokey’s current journal are listed questions about the pine bark beetles that are devouring his precious pinon trees, hotels in Grand Canyon, and the brand-new (to him) concept of “split estate,” which means that an oil company can come and drill in your yard whether you like it or not.

When the time rolls around for an open inquiry project, kids’ wonder books or question lists become a go-to place for topics, and serve as a resource for conversations among small groups of students

who are working toward common topics. If you commit to having students keep such journals, it is important to use them regularly, and periodically take some class time for explicit “maintenance” (reviewing, weeding, discussing, adding new items, sharing your own latest additions). With middle and high school kids, who intentionally or unintentionally lose a lot of things, we’ve had the best success using those little 3" x 5" mini-spiral notebooks—they fit just right in a jeans pocket or little purse.