Detailed Explanation of an "Essential Question"

One way to bring our students beyond basic fact gathering is to present them with a "Problem", or "Essential Question". Examples of "Essential Questions" can range from:

"Would a starfish make a good pet?"

to

"You are a pioneer just starting out on the Oregon Wagon Trail. You need to decide what you will take with you in order to survive the trip, and to set up a new home in the Oregon Territory."

There is no "right" or "wrong" answer to an Essential Question, as long as the answer is based on the data gathered, and can be reasonably justified.

In order to solve the problem, or propose an answer to an "Essential Question", students need to ask themselves, "What do I need to know about that topic, in order to solve this problem?"

In the case of the "starfish" question, students might start out by brainstorming, with their teacher, what they need to find out about starfish, before they can reach a decision.

What does a starfish eat?
How long does a starfish live?
How much room does a starfish need?

In the case of the Oregon Trail question, kids first brainstorm what they need to find out about living conditions on the Trail. Their final product will be a list of items they will take with them, and why.

These brainstormed questions that they come up with are called the "Subsidiary Questions" that must be answered before they can solve the "Problem" or "Essential Question". The subsidiary questions give students a direction and the data that they will need in order to come up with an answer to the Essential Question.

Technology can be a valuable tool for bringing students beyond the fact-gathering stage and up to the "Analysis/Synthesis/Evaluation" stages. Electronic encyclopedias, Internet sites, CD-ROMs, and Laserdisc programs can supply the raw data, or facts needed to answer the "Subsidiary Questions". Spreadsheets, databases, tables, and teacher-made activities
stored on the Public Drive can supply the tools that will allow students to analyze, synthesize and evaluate their raw data.

Students are motivated and enthusiastic about learning the facts, when it means that those facts will help them to come up with their own decisions or solutions to a hypothetical problem!

- Previous Page
- Back to the "Online Investigations" Page
- Return to the Gnome Home Page