Big Thinkers & Ideas:
Getting Started

Summary

Students will collaboratively brainstorm important ideas and thinkers, using free association to construct webs of knowledge and connections. This will be the entry point for students into the project, as they identify areas of interest and thinkers of note. Students will then draft their proposals indicating areas of interest, submitting for review.

Objectives

Students will develop a sense of the breadth of human knowledge, the ways in which areas of knowledge fit together, and the variety of paths they could take to the project. They will identify possible areas of interest in order to personally and intellectually engage with the project.

Materials

Chart paper
Markers
Relevant books (for research)
Computers (for research)

Pre-Work

- ☐ Prepare list of big thinkers vs. important thinkers, big ideas, vs. important ideas
- ☐ Prepare list of possible thinkers/ideas to help students branch out research
- ☐ Write down (on chart paper) big list of thinkers/ideas
- ☐ Photocopy project description hand-outs (prepare dates for final projects/progress reports)
- ☐ Ensure videos are good to go

Plan

Warm-Up (0.5-1 classes)

1. Have a list of ideas and pop culture figures on the board. Give students several minutes to discuss and ask them to identify which ideas are "big ideas" and which people are "big thinkers." Tell each table they should be prepared to defend their choice. Go around the room, asking each table to identify a big thinker or idea.

Plato (BT), Homer (the poet)
Scientific Method (BI), Science
Karl Marx (BT), Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
The earth revolves around the sun (BI), there are nine planets in our solar system
The earth is 4.5 billion years old (BI), plate tectonics
Sigmund Freud (BT), Ernest Hemmingway
"The unexamined life is not worth living" (Plato, BI), "Think before you speak. Read before you think." (Fran Leibowitz)

(Either choose figures that students will be familiar with or give them access to research tools -- smart phones, iPads, computers, etc. -- so that they can make an informed decision. This could be run with a tally of points to make it into a game)

2. What commonalities do we see? Be sure to address influential thinkers vs. writers or figures in pop culture, and ideas that affect the way we think about many things vs. either broad categories, facts, or quotations with small implications. Some of the above could be argued, of course. **Discuss briefly**.

Main Act (0.5-1 classes)

1. At their tables, have students brainstorm big ideas and thinkers. Encourage them to make free associations. If there are ideas that aren't connected but they would like to still write down, encourage students so put them down and see if they can't be connected. For example:

The internet → digital information → equality/access for everyone → social justice

Be sure students have access to books on theories/theorists and computers for research if they wrap up or if they get stuck. Have students think of technologies in addition to big ideas, concepts, thinkers…

2. Once students have worked on their brainstorms for an adequate amount of time, have a carousel: have students move one group to the left or right and add on to the other group's brainstorm; continue doing this until everyone has contributed to everyone else's chart paper. **Monitor**. Students may get caught up on the same few ideas/thinkers; in that case, wrap up the carousel. Only keep it going if it's productive.

3. Give students time to make jot notes on all of the ideas, concepts, or thinkers they find interesting for their own work. Give them enough time to circulate to do this.

4. Distribute project hand-out. Review the unit plan with students. Once you have discussed the projects, ensuring that students focus on the proposal primarily, play both *A Brief History of Nikola Tesla* and *Achilles and the Tortoise* to demonstrate how to incorporate biography/ideas into a brief visual clip that is *not* text-heavy.

Conclusion (0.5 class)

1. Ask students to individually narrow down the brainstorm topics (not just from their own group brainstorming, but from their classmates' brainstorming) to three, putting a star next to their top choice. Students should, in this class, finish their proposals and have them available for teacher approval (finishing can be homework). Students could also begin researching their topics so that they have a basic idea of what they might cover. Circulate and monitor. *Remind students that their proposal should capture who/what, why they're interested, and the 'so what' of the idea/ person*.

Assessment

Informal: Monitor student engagement. Circulate throughout to see if students can sort 'big ideas' from smaller ideas. If this is proving difficult, revisit as a class.

Adaptations

Some students may benefit from having a copy of the thinkers sheet to narrow interests. Putting up a link to an accessible article on important thinkers/inventions may be useful for students with below-grade level reading abilities.

Extensions

Students who finish should pair up with someone else who has finished early to discuss their areas of interest. Ask them to rank, based on importance, their figures/ideas -- this helps them think conceptually about big ideas/thinkers and develop criteria for further research.

Research/ Resources

Flamehorse (handle). "Top 10 Greatest Philosophers in History." *Listverse*. 19 February 2011. Web.

jeremiahjw. "The History of Nikola Tesla -- A Short Story." YouTube. 10 July 2010. Web.

Mackay, Mairi. "10 Ideas That Changed the World." *CNN*. 12 December 2008. Web.

MINI USA. "10 Not Normal Ideas That Forever Changed the World." *BuzzFeed*. 8 October 2012. Web.

Mongoose (handle). "Top 10 Most Influential Scientists." *Listverse*. 24 February 2009. Web.

OU Learn. "Achilles and the Tortoise -- 60 Second Adventures in Thought." YouTube. 3 October 2011. Web.

"Zeroes to Heroes: Ten Unlikely Ideas That Changed the World." *The New Scientist*. Web.