Case Study Activity

We’ve all been there. You have a student who you want desperately to reach, but nothing you  
do seems to be working. This student might be:  
● Struggling academically and not making progress,  
● Displaying negative behaviors that do not seem reflective of their true personality or  
that seem to be a cry for help or attention,  
● Likely advanced or gifted but not be demonstrating that in his/her schoolwork,  
● Reserved, quiet, and unresponsive to attention from you, or  
● More than one of the above.

This is a very frustrating experience for a teacher! This child could be one of your favorites, or  
he or she could be one that tests your patience the most. Either way, you want to do more.

**Think about that student now.**

● When did you know the student? (What grade, time of year, etc.)  
● What was the nature of your relationship with that student? (Supportive, difficult,  
nagging?)  
● What behaviors did this student display that frustrated you?  
● What behaviors did this student display that gave you hope for his or her growth?  
● What was that student going through at the time?  
● What strategies or approaches did you use to try to reach this child? Were these  
strategies/approaches successful?

**Talk with your table partners about your identified students. Any similarities?**

Jeffrey’s Story

Jeffrey is a junior in high school, thumbing through the pages of his American history textbook  
while his teacher, Ms. Johnson, fires up a slide presentation on the Gettysburg Address. Jeffrey  
slid through the first semester of the course, finding no great interest in history but managing  
to complete enough work at a passable level of performance to cling to a grade of C. The  
Gettysburg address is not likely to arouse his passion for learning. In addition, the unit on the  
Civil War requires students to comprehend lengthy text material and remember many key  
details, creating difficulties for many students.

To foster her students’ learning of the material, Ms. Johnson has previously modeled and had  
students practice several learning strategies, including a note-taking strategy and the creation  
of “key fact cards” for test review. As she begins her slide presentation, Jeffrey and the other  
students begin using their note-taking strategy, but Jeffrey’s mind wanders off topic from time  
to time, and he frequently shifts around in his seat. Midway through her outline of the events  
leading up to Lincoln’s oration, Ms. Johnson stops talking and casts a steady gaze in Jeffrey’s  
direction. Sensing he is the object of her attention, Jeffrey closes his book and sits up straight  
in his chair.  
“Jeffrey, your brother served in the army in the Middle East, didn’t he?” Ms. Johnson  
asks.  
“Yes,” Jeffrey replies, wondering what she is leading up to.  
“I’ll bet he came home with some stories.”  
“Some, but he doesn’t talk much about the gory stuff.” Jeffrey notices that the  
classroom is especially quiet. Even the usual shuffling of feet and back-row whispers are  
gone.  
“Probably not,” Ms. Johnson says, “the memories no doubt carry with them some heavy  
emotions. Imagine the emotions that President Lincoln felt on that chilly November day  
in 1863. His secretary, John Hay, said that Lincoln’s face had a ghastly color and that he  
was sad, mournful, almost haggard. And why wouldn’t he be sad? Just four months  
earlier on the grounds where he spoke in Pennsylvania, a northern state and not much  
distance from the nation’s capital, 7,000 men lost their lives, and another 30,000 were  
wounded.”  
“I wonder if Lincoln thought it was worth it,” Jeffrey says.  
“That’s what I’d like you to find out. Do some research. We will take some time on  
Thursday for you to tell the class what you discover. Did Lincoln think Gettysburg was  
worth it? Did he think the war was worth it?”  
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Later that day, Jeffrey stopped by the school library, something he had rarely done before. He  
described his research project to the librarian, and the librarian suggested a few good books.  
Jeffrey checked out two books on the Civil War and a biography of Abraham Lincoln to take

home with him. That night he skimmed the books, read a couple of chapters, and searched the  
Internet to find out more about the war and about President Lincoln. He compiled a set of  
notes using his note-taking strategy. He organized the notes under four headings: Why Lincoln  
Thought the War Was Worth It; What Lincoln Thought the War Would Accomplish; When  
Lincoln Was Discouraged; and What Lincoln Meant in the Gettysburg Address. From his notes,  
Jeffrey wrote a narrative of his conclusions. Jeffrey’s curiosity grew. He knew a little about his  
brother’s war experience and wanted to know more.

Jeffrey shared the draft of his report with his brother, and they talked about war. Jeffrey  
remembered the letters his brother had written him from the Middle East. Jeffrey realized that  
he already knew a little about war from those letters, and he was learning more now in his talk  
with his brother. Jeffrey’s mother looked on as the two brothers talked, and Jeffrey knew she  
was pleased to see them sharing their thoughts and feelings this way. She offered her own  
thoughts on what it is like to be the mother of a soldier who goes off to war. Jeffrey  
remembered from his research that Lincoln’s own son had joined the Union Army. Lincoln’s  
wife, he realized, must have experienced something very similar to what Jeffrey’s mother had  
just described.

Jeffrey revised his draft to include his conclusions from his talk with his brother. The next two  
days in class, he took careful notes, and each evening he studied his notes and prepared a list of  
key facts he wanted to remember. He put the facts on note cards, with a question on the  
reverse side, and drilled himself until he was sure he had mastered the details about Lincoln,  
the war, and the Gettysburg Address. He revised his report as he gained new insights. On  
Thursday, Jeffrey read his report to the class and showed some slides of Lincoln and of the  
Gettysburg battlefield. He then led the class in a discussion of the main points in his report. His  
classmates were very engaged and shared their own ideas. Ms. Johnson said that Jeffrey had  
made a fine contribution to everyone’s understanding of Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address.  
Jeffrey never looked at history the same way again.

On the Friday following Jeffrey’s presentation to the class, he aced Ms. Johnson’s test on the  
Civil War, and Ms. Johnson gleefully entered into her grade book that Jeffrey had mastered four  
standards-aligned objectives. He had acquired new knowledge. In small but meaningful ways,  
Jeffrey’s personal competencies were also enhanced, and he was now able to tackle new  
learning challenges as never before.

\*Adapted from S. Redding (2014). *The something other: Personal competencies for learning and life.* Center on Innovations in  
Learning.