Special Topics, General

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Community-Based Learning Projects for the "Real World"

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COMMUNITY-BASED

LEARNING PROJECTS

for the "Real World"

A LEARNING EXPERIMENT

As we walked down the street to the next-door elementary school, the 15 high school juniors with me began reflecting on their elementary school experiences. They remembered the Dr. Seuss stories their teachers had read to them, the art projects, the time to play, the time to just be kids. Life was simpler and more fun then, they all agreed.

Now school mostly means sitting at desks and listening to teachers talk for a large portion of the day. And when teachers aren't talking to them, they take tests, read a textbook chapter, write on a ditto, watch a film. On occasion they might be asked to discuss issues and ideas in large and small group discussions, but mostly their role is that of consumers of knowledge dispensed by their teachers. What they do produce usually has value only to their teacher since the teacher is the only person to ever see or grade the work.

I saw this feeling of educational ennui in a class I team teach on American history and literature. Even though we strived to make the class as relevant as possible and as actively engaging as possible, students still completed their tasks with one audience in mind—their teachers—and the primary goal of obtaining a good grade in the class. Some truly valued learning for learning's sake, and some completed their work for audiences beyond their classroom. The majority, though, reserved their enthusiasm for their jobs, their friends and their weekends.

On this day, however, genuine excitement filled their faces. With their home-made childrens books firmly in hand, we entered the hallway of La Cres-

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centa Elementary School and then split into three groups of five. As they filed in to the rooms filled with second and third graders, big eyes—green, blue, brown—stared up at them. First came brief introductions and movement of chairs and children, and then the teachers asked my juniors to sit down at a table with a small group of the children. They would be rotating through each group, the teachers informed my students, reading and discussing their books. "I'm nervous," one of my students said.

I moved between the three classrooms where my students read. I sat down at one and listened to Hannah read about a young child who came to America through Ellis Island at the turn of the century. "Do you know what Ellis Island was?" Hannah asked her group of six third graders. "It's where immigrants came to in America," a child at her table responded. "Very good," Hannah said, continuing on with the story. At other tables similar scenes repeated themselves, though the subjects and stories varied from immigration and the American Dream to Native Americans, all of which were topics in the first unit of our interdisciplinary class, American Studies.

"We should do this again," a few students said on our walk back to the high school. "Yeah, that was

really fun. They were really smart. I couldn't believe how much they knew."

In five minutes we were back in our classroom, and moving on in our studies of American history. My teaching partner noticed our excitement as we reentered theclassroom. "I want to go next time," she said.

NON-TRADITIONAL ASSESSMENT

One of the primary goals my teaching partner Jennifer and I had for our class was to assess students' knowledge in non-traditional ways. Our own high school history experiences had included the bubble-in answer sheet tests that we really did not mind taking, but which we knew did little to challenge our knowledge beyond recall of discrete facts. We knew tests which required a lot of writing would challenge students' thinking more, but we also did not want to rely solely on analytical writing for assessing our students' knowledge. To fill this gap we decided we wanted to test students' knowledge through a project where they could use a variety of real-life skills—writing, art, communication, organizational, social and technical— to create some product or service which would showcase their knowledge and find an audience beyond their teachers and their classroom.

Our first thematic teaching unit was entitled "Immigration and the American Dream." We began with a review of America's founding ideals, moved on to the contact between native and European cultures, then to immigration experiences and ended with a look at the Jazz Age. To correspond to these areas of study we created the following project options:

- The creation of an anthology of oral histories about recent immigration experiences. All students had been required to write a one-page oral history which dealt with immigration issues such as life in the home country, the journey to America, the acculturation process, and the conflict between first and second generations. These students served as editors of this anthology, organizing the stories, editing them, selecting a title, creating an introduction and cover, and seeing the production through to the final product.

- One group of students continued this project by marketing the anthology in bookstores and other businesses in the community. Another group planned and carried out an evening where students read their oral histories to the subject of their history and to other students who came to the event.

- Students could also find a copy of a history textbook which dealt with a topic we had studied in our class. They then read this section and wrote and sent a letter to the textbook editor which addressed the text's effectiveness.

- Another option asked students to find a newspaper or magazine article which discussed an issue raised in our first unit. Students wrote and sent a letter to the editor based on the issue raised in the article.

- Five students chose to create a debate on the issue of immigration. They researched the topic and organized a lunch-time debate at school.

These ideas are not new and teachers since the beginning of time have sought real-world learning experiences for their students. Yet few teachers in high schools provide their students with such opportunities. While some educational critics argue that teaching and assessment of learning have lost their traditional moorings, even cursory inspections of most high schools will reveal this traditional model firmly in place in many classrooms: teacher lectures, students listen, students read chapter, students fill in work sheets, students take multiple choice test.

Current educational structures promote this model. State, district and school curricular mandates generally require "coverage" of a large amount of material,leaving little time for reflection or in-depth discovery of any one area. Textbooks filled with pictures, literature and ancillary activities reinforce this need to "cover" the full scope of history. Even the typical class period of 50 minutes discourages alternative activities.

Despite these apparent roadblocks, community oriented projects can be realized if the teacher decides they are important for students to do. In our American Studies course we decided that these projects were important for our students to do, and since most of

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the project work students completed at home our decision to require these projects did not inhibit our necessity to move forward with our curriculum.

BENEFITS

In planning these activities, we did not discuss in detail why we should have our students do them. We knew instinctively that the experience would be good. However, in retrospect we recognize the many benefits.

Through their projects students learned the kinds of values most Americans agree are important for all people to possess: responsibility, respect, tolerance and hard work. Any learning activity where students must assume the sole responsibility for completing a substantive project will encourage real responsibility. Through both the writing of the oral histories on immigration and the creation of childrens books on issues such as immigration and Native Americans, students learned how many people have struggled to find their place in this nation. ("I learned to tolerate people and respect people more, especially immigrants because they need it," one student said.) And finally, for those students whose projects did not meet their expectations (or whose expectations changed when they saw the high quality work other students had done), they learned that hard work produces quality results. "I learned to stop procrastinating," one student said at the conclusion of the project.

Additionally, when students are given some control over what they do, they take ownership over their work. The students who chose the childrens book option best exemplified this sense of ownership. From the very beginning they knew who their audience was and they knew that they alone would be accountable for the product they would show to these children. The students who worked on the oral history anthology showed the least ownership of their projects. When we grew concerned over the work they had completed

we assumed some of this responsibility. Once we intervened in these students' work—we edited the oral histories and told the students all that was needed to be done to organize an evening for the oral histories—we found students taking less responsibility for the quality of the final product. We had difficulty getting the students to set and enforce deadlines, obtaining error-free work and finally getting the books out of the classroom and into the community. When we stepped in to "rescue" these projects the students lost the ownership over the final product, and hence lost interest in seeing the project to its final, successful conclusion.

REAL LIFE APPLICATION

However, even the students who assumed little ownership could still see a real-world application of their knowledge. In most circumstances students are asked to demonstrate what they learn in school in very artificial ways. Corporations do not ask their employees to bubble in an answer sheet each Friday to see if they havelearned the vocabulary words of the week. Yet, many educators do not even question the value of such an activity. These projects required students to learn American history and then make the subject comprehensible for other people in an interesting manner. One student said of the letter he wrote to the Los Angeles Times on a story on immigration: "What I found most valuable in this project is the fact that I could present my knowledge in a real-life situation... And I could show other people besides my teachers and classmates what I could do."

Students could also feel a sense of mastery over their topic. We hoped that if students studied one area in depth that they would know it well. This goal was fulfilled to varying degrees of success depending upon the project the student chose. Those who created the debate learned best the axiom teachers know about how teaching a subject is the best way to learn it. The

childrens book authors commented that they did not really learn anything new about the topic they chose for their book since we had already studied the subjects in some detail and their audience did not require a great deal of in-depth knowledge.

The childrens book authors did learn the value of an audience, though. By creating a product or event whose audience was not their teacher, students learned that knowledge shared with others is the most valuable knowledge of all. Too often our educational system creates a learning environment which segments learning from all other human endeavors. Learning is a social activity. Much of what we learn we learn when we mix with other people. Yet in most school settings we remove thatfactor from the equation.

to be a rather awe-inspiring responsibility, they also found its rewards equally powerful. Wrote one student in her evaluation of the process: "There is nothing better than talking to a kid and having them think you're like God or something."

A few students found a history textbook and wrote a letter to the editor about their book. One student looked at a book's treatment of the Ku Klux Klan, and foundthat the editors had devoted the majority of their discussion to the Klan's persecution of blacks, but had devoted no discussion to treatment of Jews. His letter to the editor eloquently explained his basis for concern over this omission. In his evaluation of his project he wrote about how his project had taught him a lesson that many students do not learn until college,

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Many students wrote in their evaluations that most important things they learned through their activities were not the facts and historical concepts. Most important to them was the time spent with elementary school children, the discovery that history textbook editors leave much of the historical record out of their accounts, and the knowledge that, as one student said, "people can make a difference."

All of the students who read their historical childrens books to the elementary school children spoke highly of their experience. Most learned that creating a compelling story line with drawings is no easy task. A few even gained some empathy for the teaching profession. Said one student, "I learned that it is not so easy to be a 3rd grade teacher." Many also gained an appreciation for the teacher's students, and their knowledge base. "Kids can read very well in 2nd grade," one wrote in his evaluation. Another remarked that "kids know more than I thought." The experience gave all of the juniors an opportunity to shine, too. For one hour they were the focus of 30 young peoples' minds. This kind of responsibility rarely rests upon students' shoulders, and while many of our students found this

that omission of information is often the most common means of creating a bias. "I learned not to trust all history books," he wrote in his evaluation. This kind of informed skepticism we try to teach implicitly in all that we do, yet the way in which the student learned this lesson will undoubtedly make for a more lasting learning experience.

This student, as nearly all of the students who participated in this project, learned that his voice matters, that he can make a difference in society. Ultimately it is this kind of attitude we want to foster in our students. We seek an informed, questioning and confident citizen who believes that he or she can effect positive change in the world.

This is the kind of student that school reform efforts hope to create. Changes in the school day, interdisciplinary and team teaching, career pathways and academies—all of these reform efforts put at the center the necessity of engaging students? minds in meaningful activities. Community-based learning projects embody the reform concepts of Ted Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools (less is more, mastery learning,

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student as worker) and *Second To None* (powerful teaching and learning, alternative means of assessment). And while a school with block scheduling, thematicteaching and career pathways may make these kinds of projects more feasible, teachers in traditional schools such as the one we teach in can find similar success.

TEACHER'S ROLE

What is required of the teacher is only a willingness to turn over to students the responsibility for their own learning. In theory this does not seem difficult to do, but in practice we found ourselves reassuming some of the responsibility for the projects because we feared the students would not complete their tasks on time or in a successful manner. In retrospect we know this was a mistake, because as soon as we removed some of the onus from the students' shoulders they relinquished their ownership over their task.

When students choose projects for their next unit we will restrain our desire to provide that safety net. We also hope to elicit from students their own ideas for community-oriented projects so that they can retain even more ownership of their learning.

Ultimately it is this sense of ownership that creates a learning experience which has the most value for students. We saw this occur at its best when our students sat down at the knee-high tables to read to the elementary school students. Their faces showed their pride in their work, and their smiles showed they had found an audience that valued their knowledge, their efforts and themselves as people. They had discovered that learning really matters.