

Authentic to Whom and What? The Role of Authenticity in Project-Based Learning in English Language Arts

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Abstract: Presents a framework for authenticity that informed co-design of a project-based 9th-grade English Language Arts course. A qualitative study examined ways teachers and students experienced authenticity. Three types of authenticity contributed to engagement and learning: being (1) authentic to self through opportunities for choice and agency; (2) authentic to others by addressing audiences through public performances and products; (3) providing opportunities to use authentic, genre-specific tools. Challenges to implementation—assessment and disciplinary norms—are discussed.

Keywords: Learning Environments, Literacy, English Language Arts, Project-Based Learning

Major issues

Project based learning (PBL) has a long history in US schooling (Dewey, 1938), but much of this work in recent years takes place in STEM contexts, developing practices around projects and inquiry, and connecting learning to real world challenges. Some school-based PBL takes place in history classrooms, but less has been studied about PBL in the English language arts classroom (ELA; Condliffe, 2016; a notable exception is Beach and Myers, 2001). Project based learning is intended to provide opportunities for teachers and their students to create learning spaces that are authentic and relevant. This study examines how 9th grade language arts teachers and students, during a design-based research project, encountered and experienced the issue of authenticity in PBL. Our research questions are: (1) What aspects of authenticity in ELA PBL do teachers take up and see as most meaningful? (2) How does authenticity relate to student perceptions and engagement with ELA PBL?

Theoretical approach

Our overall perspective on learning and human action draws on notions of mediated action and communities of practice. Our perspective on project-based learning is centered on the notion of “authentic making.” As in most project-based approaches (e.g., Baines & DeBarger, 2017), we see a question or challenge driving and providing purpose and coherence to multi-week project work, where activities lead toward a culminating production, in the form of a concrete, complex artifact or performance. Three design criteria unpack the notion of authenticity applied to ELA PBL: “*Authentic to self*”, “*Authentic to others*”, and “*Authentic tools*”.

Authenticity criteria are based on prior work (Polman, 2012), where we noted three kinds of authenticity that learning environment designers across disciplinary contexts often attempt to achieve: encouraging “authentic personal agency”, having “authentic community connections”, and using “externally authentic cultural tools”.

Context and methods

Eleven 9th grade teachers from five schools in two school districts in a United States Mountain West state participated over a two-year period (2015-16 and 2016-17) with a research and development team (including the authors) consisting of six university-based faculty members (in Schools of Education), one specialist on digital media and learning in ELA based at a community library, and six university-based doctoral students (in Schools of Education). The majority of the research and development team were former ELA teachers. Using a co-design model (Penuel, Roschelle, & Shechtman, 2007), the team of researchers and teachers developed and refined a year-long 9th grade English Language Arts course. The course is called “Compose Our World,” and consists of four core projects that aim to make ELA emotionally and intellectually engaging for *all* students as they “compose” themselves, connect to wider communities, and become active world citizens. Additionally, all course materials are designed for local adaptation, so teachers can create experiences that are meaningful to their particular students, that adhere to specific standards, and that are engaging to teach. Teachers taught between one and four projects each year for two years. Teachers participated in a four day initial design institute, six two-hour sessions, and received individual support throughout the year.

Data sources on *teacher perceptions*, *student perceptions*, and *classroom enactments* including field notes, surveys, interviews, and artifacts such as teacher reflections, student work products, and emails were analyzed. Observations occurred 2-4 times monthly during enactment.

We used a design-based research model in which data analysis is conducted while teachers implement course materials, contributing to building local theories and informing subsequent instruction. We conducted ongoing and retrospective analysis, using qualitative research methods to code data, identify themes, and conduct procedures for trustworthiness. We combined etic and emic approaches to identify codes: starting with etic codes for the three broad senses of authenticity described above, and searching for emergent, emic senses where authenticity became salient to students and teachers.

Findings

Across classrooms, teachers and students pointed to authenticity as valuable. Teachers frequently referenced authenticity as valuable to student learning. In interviews and surveys, students consistently expressed feeling increased excitement and connection when projects offered choice and opportunities for real audiences.

Teachers enacted activities that students found to be authentic to self by providing opportunities for: choice, self-reflection, and connections to students' lives. Data analysis revealed that both teachers and students saw choice as key for developing feelings of ownership and agency during project enactment. Across the four projects, teachers provided students with opportunities to choose topics, groups, ways to structure class time, and means of self-expression. In interviews, students also expressed feeling most connected to projects when they felt that they had choice. A tension that arose was differences in interpretation of choice. While teachers and researchers assumed that students would recognize projects as authentic to self when they had freedom to choose topics and means of expression, students across classrooms voiced stronger feelings of ownership over and agency within projects when they were given the opportunity to determine how they *spent their time* to complete project goals and when they perceived that each step in learning and composing was not predetermined by the teacher.

Authenticity to others was emphasized by each of the 11 teachers. Analysis illustrated a significant shift from year one to year two in enactment of the projects and the ways students were encouraged to develop products for authentic audiences. Additionally, researchers recognized that while teacher interviews and survey responses emphasized authenticity to others as directly tied to audience for students' final product, students demonstrated higher levels of engagement in project goals from the moment they began considering their audience.

In each of the course project designs, students take on roles (e.g., investigative journalist or museum exhibit developer) that provide them with opportunities to create products that mirror those found in the world outside of the classroom. To create these products, students adopt the tools of the professionals they are emulating, while teachers help to create connections between these authentic tools and the English language arts skills taught in 9th grade. The themes that emerged from our data in this area were (1) the importance of capitalizing on student familiarity with literate practices using genre-specific tools, and also addressing teacher discomfort with unfamiliar tools, and (2) teachers' tensions around navigating the use of authentic tools while attending to the need to document learning through assessment and grading.

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