Promoting Learning Through Authentic Instruction and Assessment

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My graduate professor introduced the syllabus and explained that we would spend a good chunk of the course studying authentic instruction and assessment. I silently chuckled, thinking, “Authentic instruction? What’s the alternative? Pretend instruction?” But over the course of the semester, I realized that the concepts of authentic learning are no joke. They offer a valuable tool for teachers who want to provide meaningful instruction.

The concept of authentic learning comes from the work of Fred Newmann, Walter Secada, and Gary Wehlage of Wisconsin’s Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools. They were trying to discover why “many innovations fail to improve the quality of instruction or student achievement” and concluded that “even the most innovative activities ... can be implemented in ways that undermine meaningful learning.” For meaningful learning to take place, they argue, “innovations should aim toward a vision of authentic student achievement” (Newmann and Wehlage 1993, 8; emphasis added). This article focuses on their vision of authentic learning.

What is authentic student achievement or learning? Newmann, Secada, and Wehlage believe that learning must be significant and meaningful if it is going to be authentic. When educators talk about authentic learning, they are referring to learning that results from tasks like those that students would likely encounter in the real world. In school, students typically must reproduce information rather than make meaning from it. In the real world, however, adults construct or produce meaning or knowledge as they perform their daily activities. Architects take the principles they have learned and use them to produce a new design for a building. Physicians make meaning from the symptoms patients exhibit, and then they diagnose and treat the illness.

Authentic learning contains three real-world tasks as key components: construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and value beyond school. Students construct knowledge through conversing, writing, repairing, building, and doing other similar activities. They engage in disciplined inquiry by building on previous knowledge and seeking in-depth understanding of a topic. Finally, value beyond school requires students to use and manipulate knowledge in order to produce original work that has meaning beyond simply “documenting [their] competence” (Newmann, Secada, and Wehlage 1995, 11).

Jesus, the Master Teacher, demonstrated these principles of authentic learning. He helped people inquire, put pieces of information together, and apply knowledge to real-world concerns. He never taught the disciples just so that they would perform well on a test; learning was always in the context of life situations. When 5,000 people who gathered to hear His teaching were hungry, He asked Philip where they would buy food. According to John 6:6 (NIV), “He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.” Jesus knew the answer, but He allowed Philip and the other disciples to assess the problem and look for possible solutions. These students learned more about the power of Jesus and their need to trust Him that day than they would have if He had given a lecture and they had memorized answers for a test.
Authentic Instruction

Teachers who want to provide authentic instruction for their students must ensure that their students engage in higher-order thinking. According to Benjamin Bloom’s taxonomy, the higher-order thinking of authentic instruction includes application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation—not simply knowledge or comprehension (1956).

In order for students to manipulate information and ideas meaningfully, they must have deep knowledge about the topic. “For students, knowledge is deep when it makes clear distinctions, develops arguments, solves problems, constructs explanations, and otherwise works with relatively complex understandings.... Knowledge is thin or superficial when it does not deal with significant concepts of a topic or discipline—for example, when students have a trivial understanding of important concepts or when they have only a surface acquaintance with their meaning” (Newmann and Wehlage 1993, 9).

Another key facet of authentic instruction is that students must engage in substantive conversation. Students need extended exchanges with the teacher, their peers, or both to explore subject matter.

Finally, if instruction is to be authentic, a connection to the world beyond the classroom must take place. This connection is crucial because, as stated earlier, authentic learning requires tasks that are like those that students will face in the real world. To provide authentic instruction, teachers need to plan ways for students to connect their deep knowledge with real-world problems or with personal experiences.

John 4 contains an example of authentic instruction. When Jesus spoke with the Samaritan woman, His questions and statements forced her to manipulate information and ideas. While she spoke of literal water, He talked about living water. Using her knowledge about prophets and worship, He provided information about true worship that helped deepen her knowledge and produce more complex understanding. The student and teacher had an extended conversation, and it clearly had value beyond the “classroom” because it was a life-changing experience for her and for the others she later brought to Jesus.

It’s difficult to teach every lesson in an authentic manner. Authentic instruction takes more time than other methods do, and every lesson may not lend itself to authentic instruction. Even with lessons that are well suited to authentic instruction, teachers should recognize that they may find difficulty including all four components of authentic instruction in a given lesson. However, the more teachers can include the components, the more authentic the lesson will be.

Authentic Assessment

Like authentic instruction, authentic assessment seeks to evaluate students’ learning in ways that are like real-world uses of knowledge. We all know of cases in which students could recite facts for a test but couldn’t use the information in a meaningful way just days later. Authentic assessment strives to make the material usable in real-world settings.

According to Newmann, Secada, and Wehlage, an authentic assessment requires students to accomplish seven tasks (1995):

1. Organize information: Students construct knowledge by organizing, synthesizing, interpreting, explaining, or evaluating complex information.
2. Consider alternatives: Students construct knowledge by considering alternative solutions, strategies, perspectives, or points of view.
3. Use disciplinary content: Students show their understanding of content; they use ideas, theories, or perspectives that are considered central to a discipline; or they do both.
4. Use disciplinary processes: Students use methods of inquiry, research, or communication that are characteristic to a discipline.
5. Produce written communication: Students
In assessment, the participation of students in communication that is beyond the usual audience of the teacher adds value beyond school to their learning.

6. Address a problem that is connected to the real world: Students address a problem or issue that is similar to one that they have encountered or might encounter outside the classroom.

7. Communicate knowledge, present a product or performance, or take some action for an audience that is beyond the teacher, the classroom, and even the school: In assessment, the participation of students in communication that is beyond the usual audience of the teacher adds value beyond school to their learning.

Conclusion
Planning for authentic learning takes work, and it is time-consuming. Teacher manuals do not usually give lesson plans for authentic instruction and assessment. Providing authentic learning experiences for students will also probably result in teaching fewer topics, although the instruction will have greater depth.

Is it worth the cost? Absolutely! Authentic learning promotes student engagement of the material because students relate the lesson to the real world rather than seeing it as just a meaningless exercise. Learning requires hard work, and when students are engaged, they are more likely to do the hard work required to learn. Additionally, authentic learning promotes transfer of school learning to life beyond school, benefiting both the students and society (Newmann, Secada, and Wehlage 1995). Authentic learning—learning that includes construction of knowledge, deep inquiry, and value beyond school—is a valuable tool for teachers who want to promote genuine learning.

Illustrating what authentic learning might look like for a unit on contemporary issues, an example of a task for a high school Bible class appears on the ACSI website at www.acsi.org/publications/cse. The lesson includes the four components of authentic instruction as well as the seven components of authentic assessment. Permission is granted to teachers at ACSI member schools to copy and use this lesson within their schools. Notice of copyright—© 2002 by Karen Wrobbel—must be included.

References