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Sparking Passion: Engaging Student Voice through Project-Based Learning in Learning Communities

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Abstract

How do we confront entrenched educational practices in higher education that lead to student demotivation, poor retention, and low persistence? This article argues that project-based learning that situates student voice and capacity at the center of culturally-responsive curriculum has the potential to spark student passion for problem-solving real world issues that directly affect them, their family, and/or their community, especially when combined with other key component student-centered strategies found in learning communities. The article asserts that we learn more when we are doing something we care about, and project-based learning (a.k.a. Passion Projects) that responds to students in the room not only sends the message that we value their experiences and points of view, which in hand, leads to a more inclusive, positive environment, it also provides experience for the kind of thinking and skills students need to integrate for 21st century careers.

Keywords

project-based learning, culturally responsive teaching, passion, motivation

Introduction

Some of the most brilliant, creative people I know did not do well at school. Many of them didn't really discover what they could do—and who they really were—until they'd left school and recovered from their education.

—Ken Robinson, *The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything*

San Diego City College has provided fruitful ground for the development of learning communities that draw on student interests, most notably in the formation of linked reading and writing courses in our basic skills program. These courses are designed to empower student voice, agency, and passion for learning via a social justice curriculum. For the last eight semesters, I have developed and refined an approach that motivates and engages students in my basic skills reading course. My experience demonstrates that learners learn more and persist through challenges when we are having fun and/or doing something we really care about. Project-based learning—Passion Projects—situates student voice and experience at the center of the curriculum, which fits well with the high impact practices that shape learning communities. Passion Projects promote assessment that engages multiple intelligences and support student-centered pedagogy rather than prefabricated, predetermined, textbook unit of inquiry. This improvisational ethos values the practitioner's expertise while welcoming the messiness that comes with the kind of culturally responsive, project-based learning necessary to capitalize on student interests and passions. It is a paradigmatic shift in mindset and practice, and it is worth every bit of struggle.

Addressing Student Motivation, Retention, and Persistence

Howard Gardner (2011) has identified nine multiple intelligences, including verbal-linguistic, mathematical-logical, musical, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalist, and existential. Clearly, most traditional academic classrooms (especially English) favor verbal-linguistic intelligence, or the skills of listening, speaking, and writing. Boiled down, it might look like this: teachers lecture; students read and listen, take notes, talk to each other, write about the topic or take a test; the class moves on. Although this pedagogical approach works for some students, this method is more top down than it needs to be, and at the end of the day, it can be boring, too. Monotonous. Predictable. Stale. It can divest learning of its true potential to empower student voice and agency. Worse, it excludes and (at times) demoralizes students who possess other forms of intelligence. It sends the pernicious message to too many students that

they are “not smart,” and guess what students do when they feel left behind or left out? They leave.

As educational critic Ken Robinson explains in his books and renowned TedTalks, too many students come to (in my case) community college with years of less-than-optimal, sometimes downright traumatic experiences in education that they must “recover” from (*if* they recover). A one-size-fits-all pedagogical approach—like privileging one kind of intelligence over all others—creates collateral damage. In my experience, many adult learners enter with an unhealthy self-image shaped by false, yet, deeply entrenched, beliefs of inadequacy.¹ This is the very real, shameful effect of truncated forms of assessment and cultural incompetency in traditional schooling. Many educational researchers and practitioners have documented that failure is often not the result of a student’s lack of knowledge or understanding; rather, traditional assessment is the problem (Howard, 2010; Robinson, 2009). This is why I employ a variety of assessments in my teaching, affording each student the opportunity to show what they know in a way that cultivates their strengths instead of revealing their weaknesses. This means more collaborative work and group presentations by “crews” or “tribes” in the classroom, oral assessments, readings that directly connect to that crew’s interests or area of contribution to the passion project, and individual and group conferencing for individualized goal setting and overall performance assessment.

One of my goals is to design learning experiences that not only meet the objectives of the course or learning community but also encourage students to discover/demonstrate their strengths and show what they have learned in ways that celebrate their various intelligences and learning styles. Like many others in my department, I openly admit that I do this in pursuit of a much greater goal: healing, and, hopefully thereby, fostering a renewed sense of belonging in school and joy in learning, the kind every learner deserves to have.

Culturally Responsive Curriculum and Project-Based Learning

To confront entrenched educational practices in higher education that lead to student demotivation, poor retention, and low persistence, many departmental colleagues who teach in learning communities have implemented some form of project-based learning that situates student voice and capacity at the center of culturally responsive curriculum. As professors in a Hispanic-serving institution in an urban border/military city, we serve a diverse student population, including international students who cross the border every day, veterans, single parents, returning students, working students, homeless students, students with addictions and/or mental illness, students who just finished high school, and students who

¹ Students of color in particular (my core student populations) are disproportionately affected as the result of structural racism and deficit thinking in the classroom.

never attended high school in the first place. The majority are working class and first-generation college students. And that is just a *glimpse* of our mosaic. As you might imagine, this level of diversity is both a blessing and a challenge. While class discussions, group work, and campus culture can be interesting and vibrant, the pressure for individualized instruction can seem too problematic to bear. However, building a community of learners, which is a primary focus of learning communities, takes the pressure off the teacher to be everything to everyone.

In my department, teachers have developed their own ways of leading students to discover or articulate what really matters to them. Simple tends to work best in my experience. I begin with a set of open-ended questions to encourage students to reflect on their lived experiences. I ask them: “What do *you* need?” Then after we’ve jotted down ideas and discussed some of the problems, I ask them, “What does your *family* need?” And finally, “What does your *community* need?” I want them to start here because this is where their lived experiences become the curriculum and where they find their voice, position, and motivation to become more knowledgeable. If “need” does not spark the thinking necessary for meaningful discussion, using the same sequence, I will ask about “problems” instead: What problems do *you* [*your family, your community*] have? I then coach students to explain and elaborate their views while we anchor their responses to local and global efforts for social, economic, racial, and environmental justice. These discussions shape my curriculum planning in real time as we continue the focus on course content in the context of both individual and group work—the foundations of what we describe as passion projects.

So what are Passion Projects exactly?² Depending on where students are from, what they have been through, and what they need or know (or want to know), they might bring up the need for affordable housing or transportation, access to healthy foods, or subsidized daycare. They might discuss distrust between the community and the police. They might talk about anything from better financial aid to immigration rights to the minimum wage to the foster care system. What is important is that students identify a problem that affects them directly, one that they care deeply about. From here, the project-based learning takes flight. Students investigate the issue of their choosing and present their findings to the learning community, and if possible, to other learning communities in an end-of-the-semester Research Symposium. This semester my students are doing an all-class passion project on the Tiny Homes “Housing First” Movement to address homelessness in San Diego and around the nation. Our school is smack-dab in the middle of several homeless encampments. Our students see the hardship daily and several have experienced homelessness themselves. When the semester started, a local coalition of volunteers called Homeless to Housed had

² Many professors include some type of service learning component for the Passion Projects.

just formed. The class decided to get involved. One crew created posters using pathos and protested at a City Council meeting; another crew wrote emails to the mayor using basic rhetorical strategies to persuade him to help the cause; another crew tabled on campus to collect signatures for a petition; another crew helped build two tiny homes for the homeless while a film crew filmed footage of the project to present to our college president with the goal of obtaining his endorsement of the local movement.³

Although the final projects vary depending on student interests and talents, I have developed a guide, *The Five Ps of Passion Projects*. Regardless of what form the final presentation takes, students are required to research, annotate, summarize along the way, and include facts, statistics, expert opinion, and cause/effect thinking for their chosen topic. *The Five Ps of Passion Projects* includes:

1. Poetry (original verse, slam or traditional, performed or recorded);
2. Posters (infographics using free online makers like Piktochart or Infogr.am, or traditional posters are fine);
3. PowerPoint/Prezi presentations;
4. Public Service Announcements (PSAs and mini-documentaries);⁴ and
5. Performances (songs, short plays/skits, panel discussions, etc.).

Embrace the Mess: Project-Based Learning in Linked Courses

Now let's get real. This path is wrought with trouble. Students in my experience have a hard time meeting outside of class because of jobs, children, long commutes, and so on. Many students have never been asked before about their passions, and so the beginning of the process can be slow moving. On our side, not coming in with a set schedule and nicely tied up units can freak a teacher out. Letting go of perceived control and preplanned units takes a great deal of trust in our students and our expertise.

But how can we have a student-centered classroom and how can we have culturally-responsive curriculum if we design it *before* we meet our students? We can operate from current events or our own cultural knowledge or lived experiences, but why do that when we can talk to real people in our classes? Yes, the prefabricated curriculum may be culturally *relevant*, but is it culturally *responsive*? The difference is that the latter integrates the very students in the room into the curriculum; it *responds* directly to them. This doesn't mean we have

³ To see the video students in our basic skills learning community presented in the Spring 2016 Learning Communities Research Symposium, see:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1MfiXtDw2zQ&feature=youtu.be>

⁴ To see examples of student PSAs, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gHP3F66NzWs>
<https://www.wevideo.com/hub/#media/ci/364569339>

to give up all lesson planning but that we build into our courses the opportunity for students to move beyond the “show up and do this” nature of traditional schooling. Our emphasis becomes: “what problems do we need to solve and how might we do that?”

In my basic skills reading/writing learning community, students read, annotate, journal their social justice topic, and create a Passion Project around it. Students then write and revise a paper for their portfolio on the topic in the linked writing course. I can still teach everything from main ideas to paraphrase, summary, and annotation, and my partner can teach reasoning, evidence, and rhetorical appeals, as students complete projects that matter to them. A boon is that we no longer read 30 of the same papers. This requires more conferencing, flexibility, and individualized coaching, instruction, and direction. It also requires a certain level of comfort with disarray and messiness. With so many moving parts, the classroom loses predictability and rigidity. In its place we gain increased engagement in the classroom and a more inclusive and fun learning environment.

Conclusion

Let’s face it. As citizens today, we have a lot of problems to solve. From rising sea levels in Florida to persistent drought in California to a water crisis in Flint, there is no shortage of need for innovative problem solving. Unsurprisingly, the careers of today and tomorrow are much more interdisciplinary than ever before. Project-based work not only increases students’ motivation and engagement, it positions them to become strong, successful leaders in a rapidly changing world.

In fact, when a scholarship group out of Canada asked what factors might reshape the future of careers in Canada and what major forces would drive change in how and where Canadians work over the next two decades, the major forces identified included aging and demographic changes, climate change and energy, immigration and a borderless world, digital technology, increased personalization, security and stability, and scientific and technical advancements (Sources of Change, 2014). These responses suggest that students of today need to be proficient in, and able to synthesize, key skills and knowledge from multiple disciplines. One of the identified careers, Telesurgeon, did not exist a mere 10 years ago: this “trained surgeon operates on patients remotely using robotic arms, a master controller, and a sensory system that provides feedback to its user.” This career combines medicine, robotics, and telecommunications. Another career, a Regional Grid Director, “works with a diverse team to build, maintain, and run grids that act as renewable energy sources.” This career combines engineering, foreign language, public administration, geology, and disaster relief. Clearly project-based learning that engages student interests and talents beyond discrete

disciplines is necessary for learners in the 21st century to solve real-world problems, and learning communities that center student voice and capacity in the classroom are exceptionally well poised to facilitate this shift.

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