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Introduction

Education is what remains after one has forgotten
what one has learned in school.

—Anonymous

THE HISTORY OF AUTHENTIC LEARNING

All learning was once authentic. In the 14th century, when someone wanted to learn a trade, he entered into an apprenticeship where he spent several years with someone in the profession learning on the job. A book education was only for the very wealthy or the clergy. An apprentice would watch the master and then try to emulate what he was doing. Then, after getting the hang of it, he would be promoted to master himself and would take over the business or start his own. Thus, if you wanted to be a farmer, you did not go to farming school where you were shown charts and graphs or you took exams on how to be a farmer. If you wanted to learn to be a farmer, you farmed—same with blacksmiths, bakers, and tailors. You worked with someone from that profession, and if he wanted that trade to continue, he was obligated to show you the ropes.

Teachers go through their own apprenticeships. You no doubt spent time as a student teacher, watching the certified teacher and learning from him or her until eventually he or she let you take over the class. Afterward, once you found a job, you were given a class of your own and expected to do the job you once studied and shadowed. Doctors and electricians experience the same thing with residency programs and apprenticeships of their own.

In the early 1800s, public schools were created. This takes us back to the one-room schoolhouse. A single teacher taught all of the subject areas to a variety of ages. In this mutual instruction strategy, rather than just the teacher giving instructions, the older students may have assisted in teaching the younger ones. Next, the Mann reforms



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came along, and children were placed into specific grades based on age. All of the 11-year-olds were placed in one class, and so on, and so forth. The major problem is this structure only works if all 11-year-olds think the same and have the same abilities. Any teacher who has spent any time in the classroom knows this is not the case. There are some 11-year-olds who are a couple of grade levels ahead in their thinking, while some 11-year-olds could stand to repeat some grades. This is the difference between what James Delisle (2006) called an *age-mate* and a *peer-mate*. An age-mate is someone who is the same age as you. Because of this, you typically share similar interests and can relate to one another, but not always. Peer-mates are something else completely. Peer-mates are those who share similar interests and relate to one another, but there might be a difference in age. Consider a 9-year-old who can have a conversation with an adult, or a 46-year-old who still talks like he is in high school. In a perfect world, age-mates and peer-mates are one and the same, and structuring schools like this makes sense, but we know this is not the way it actually works. If schools were authentic, we would place children in classes based on their peer-mates or their abilities, not birthdays.

Following the Mann reforms, we compartmentalized schools even further, not only breaking classes apart by age, but also by subject area. We specialized in content areas, such as reading, math, social studies, and science, giving separate evaluations in these areas and training teachers specific to these subjects. This is not the most authentic way to learn. Put yourself in a sociologist's shoes: Children go into one room and learn about one thing, then a bell goes off, and the kids herd themselves into another room to learn about something that has nothing to do with what they were just learning. And this repeats itself again and again the entire day, every day, for an entire year. How does this look in a sociologist's eyes? Without any knowledge of the school system, he or she would consider it some kind of Pavlovian experiment, where the subjects must turn their brains off at the sound of a bell only to have to turn them on again at the sound of another. Because we divide our classes up into these core content areas, we take the context out of learning. In the real world, you do not do math at work for an extended period of time and, with the blow of the whistle, switch to only using your reading skills. Instead, areas of learning are blended together, and you might be required to access math, reading, and science all at the same time.

More than a hundred years ago, John Dewey (yes, the very same library decimal guy) came up with a radical notion. What if schools were not just about learning knowledge? What if they were also a place to learn *how to live*? Rather than focusing on the content of the three Rs (reading, writing, and arithmetic), what if we helped a student to realize his or her full potential and the ability to learn something he or she

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can use later on in life? Essentially, Dewey proposed providing children with skills, not content, that allow them to be successful in whatever it is they want to do.

Consider the saying, “Give a man a fish, he eats for a single day; teach him to fish, and he will eat for the rest of his life.” Ultimately, that leads us to the question: Are we teaching our students how to fish, or are we *giving* them the fish? In many cases, we are just giving them the fish in the form of content. We are not teaching them the skills needed to catch the fish themselves and survive in the world. The way we have positioned our school systems, we essentially attempt to teach students how to fish by looking at the different parts of a fishing pole and/or the various methods and equipment used to catch a fish. Students can recite these parts by memorization and identify the various types of fishing equipment by sight, but at no time do they actually go out and fish, nor do they experiment with various methods to find the one that works best for different situations. How enduring is that education going to be?

THE PROBLEM

When you think back to when you were earning your education degree, how practical were the classes that focused on educational theory, as opposed to those where you actually did something practical? We talk a lot about theory but do not spend enough time in the practice of these skills. For example, we spend a lot of time in social studies class telling students what it means to be good citizens of their community and various ways they can take part in it, citing specific examples. Would it not be more effective to have students work on their own community service projects where they experience firsthand what it means to be a good citizen and what it entails?

As you can see, the problem is that *our modern classrooms are often not authentic*. Students do not produce anything that is going to be used by someone else. They do not experience things for themselves and learn from that. The days of the few classes where students were learning a practical hands-on skill that they could apply to their everyday life, such as home economics or wood shop, are being abandoned so that we can get more math or reading time with students. School is an artificial learning environment. We are putting students in a vacuum and then expecting them to understand the context of where their learning fits into the real world.



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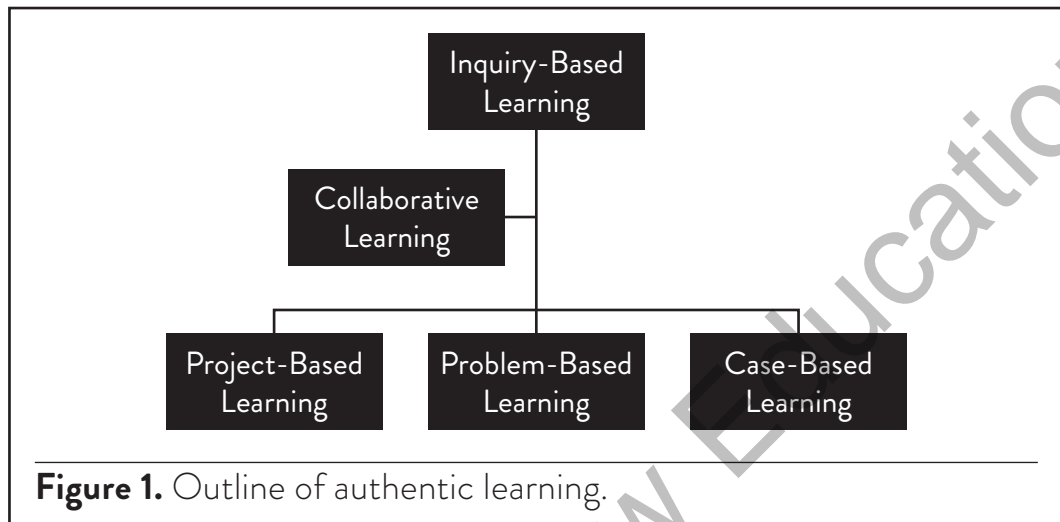
HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book aims to provide teaching strategies that allow you to give your students an authentic learning experience they can apply to their lives. It will start with a justification for authentic learning and how it will help students achieve Domain D of the rigor/relevance chart created by the International Center for Leadership in Education (Jones, 2004), as well as how it teaches 21st-century skills. Each subsequent chapter will discuss a specific strategy, providing you with an explanation of the strategy and how it allows for authentic learning.

Figure 1 outlines the authentic learning strategies. It begins with inquiry-based learning at the top. All of the other strategies use a form of inquiry-based learning, so it is important to understand it. All strategies may use collaborative learning, so it is equally important to be purposeful in teaching students how to work together to achieve a task. Inquiry and collaboration lead to more specific strategies, which include project-based learning, problem-based learning, and case-based learning. Once you decide to use an authentic strategy, how do you become an authentic teacher? The book will conclude by providing specific tactics that can be used inside and outside the classroom to bring the real world to students and vice versa.

Authentic learning can be a very powerful way to educate students. It can change the way students learn as well as the way you teach. It will certainly create an enduring real-world understanding of what students are learning, rather than just surface-level memorization that will only benefit one if he or she is playing Trivial Pursuit. You can either employ all of the strategies provided in this book or focus on one and try to do it really well. The decision is yours, but by making this decision you are ensuring that your students will be getting a better education—one they will be able to use throughout their lives.

Introduction



1

Chapter

What Is Authentic Learning?

Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.

—Ben Franklin

Simply put, authentic learning is real-life learning. It is more complicated than that, of course, but for the most part, that definition hits the proverbial nail on the head. There are many different ways to achieve authentic learning, but at its best, authentic learning should (Reeves, Herrington, & Oliver, 2002):

1. have real-world relevance;
2. be ill-defined, requiring students to define tasks and subtasks needed to complete the activity;
3. comprise complex tasks to be investigated by students over a sustained period of time;
4. provide the opportunity for students to examine the task from different perspectives, using a variety of resources;
5. provide the opportunity to collaborate;
6. provide the opportunity to reflect;
7. be able to be integrated and applied across different subject areas and lead beyond domain-specific contents;
8. be seamlessly integrated with assessment;



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9. create polished products valuable in their own right rather than as a preparation for something else; and
10. allow competing solutions and a diversity of outcomes (p. 564).

Although all are necessary elements, there are a few that can be especially important for teaching students long-term skills:

Ill-defined tasks. Because the tasks are ill defined, students have to define the tasks themselves and determine what is needed to complete them. This leads to a very important lifelong skill known as *task prioritization*. Task prioritization is something that not only students could stand to learn, but many adults as well. Task prioritization helps prevent that dreaded P-word, *procrastination*. By creating a list of tasks and then determining which ones need to be done when, students not only learn how to fish, but also learn how to do so efficiently. Along with task prioritization comes *time management*. In learning this, students must choose how to manage their time. How much time do they need for each skill? What needs to be done first and by what date so they have enough time to finish the remaining tasks? They must manage their time the way that best suits their needs. What employer would not want someone who could prioritize tasks and manage time? What parent would not want that of his or her child? These skills will take one far in the adult world and will give someone an advantage over someone who does not possess them.

Polished products. Nobody likes busy work. And yet that is what students do a majority of the time in school. If they are lucky, an assignment might get hung on the fridge, or a parent might store it away in a memory box to pull out and look at years from now. Rarely are students creating something that can be used later or pointed to as an indicator of their ability. You would not take a test with an A+ on it and show it to a college recruiter. You would, however, take in a portfolio of your work that you created for a class or tell the recruiter about a campaign you worked on. If students feel there is value in a product other than just a grade, this adds to their motivation and produces higher quality work because they know someone other than the teacher might see it.

Opportunity to reflect. The best way to determine what someone has learned is not by having him or her complete a test or even create a product. The best way to determine what has been learned is through reflection. What a teacher wants a student to learn and what he or she actually learns can be two very different things. However, the lesson the student took from an assignment might be way more important to him or her than what the teacher intended.

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For example, a student is working on a literary analysis paper for the book *For Whom the Bell Tolls* by Ernest Hemingway. The student receives a B- because the teacher determined he learned the basics of the themes she was focusing on, but he did not show a deep level of understanding. The student might have learned, however, that he needs to revise better. He understands the themes at a deeper level, just as the teacher wanted; however, he did not go back and compare his paper to the rubric. If he had, he might have realized he was not going into enough depth and would have added to his paper to make a higher quality product. His breadth of knowledge on Hemingway will not be of much use down the road. However, the lesson he learned of going back and revising his work will be a huge benefit later on.

The problem comes when the student does not reflect and come to the realization of what he actually has learned. What if he does not reflect upon the process and realize that the lack of revision was the reason for the B- paper? What if the student is content with a B- paper and goes on to make the same mistake later on, only at much higher stakes? We need to be more purposeful about allowing students to reflect on what they learned, not just assessing what we want them to learn. Authentic learning provides a space for reflection to occur.

BENEFITS OF AUTHENTIC LEARNING

There are many benefits of authentic learning, but here are six of the most impactful. Each benefit is important in its own right, but combined they make for a very powerful learning experience. Authentic learning offers (Windham, 2007):

- relevance,
- preparation,
- critical thinking,
- a multidisciplinary nature,
- evaluation, and
- interactivity.

Relevance

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. The image in Figure 2 sums up the importance of relevance quite nicely.