

Keeping it Real

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Like many adults, I have trouble remembering a time in school when I felt really engaged and empowered. My one cherished memory was of fourth grade when my teacher created a “town” out of our classroom. We all had to apply for the job we wanted, pay rent and utilities, balance our checkbooks, and receive a paycheck. I yearned for the newspaper reporter position. I put my best effort, and penmanship, into my job application because I truly cared if I got the job or not. Now, as a teacher in a project-based school, this seems contrived and almost silly. Although I got that newspaper job, I never got to publish a newspaper. Other than the bankers who signed our paychecks, I am not sure anyone really accomplished their “job.” Yet, this experience seemed more connected to the real world than anything else I had encountered before, or would encounter in my 13 years of general education. It is one of the gems I took with me from elementary school, when I first knew I wanted to be a teacher.

That early taste of what I enjoyed so much in that project set me on a course to create authentic learning experiences for my students. The Maya Community Project is a joint venture between my classroom and Virmah, an organization run by Vicente Cumes of San Pedro, Guatemala, to send Mayan students in the highlands of Guatemala to school. My class researched the ancient Maya and learned about the current conditions of indigenous people in Guatemala by analyzing excerpts of Rigaburta Menchu Tum’s memoir. Students then applied for various jobs and worked together to write, translate, publish and sell a children’s book about Mayan culture.

Adria Steinberg (1997) discusses the need for schools to provide “real” work, where students have direct access to the world and opportunities to impact lives beyond their own. She asks, “How Real is Real Enough?” and presents several guidelines to help teachers check the authenticity of projects.

The Work has Personal and/or Social Value, Beyond the School Setting. Middle school students are intrigued by humanity, from the girl across the classroom to the boy thousands of miles away. Often it is hard to tune them out to the people and social systems around them, so it is important to bring that human perspective into my class. By creating a product that could be marketed and sold to address a real need—sending Mayan children to school—I was able to bridge my classroom and the world outside while still teaching history content. In addition, students felt they were creating something of lasting value. Seeing people from around the world purchase their book was a powerful reinforcement of the importance of their work.

The Work is Taken Seriously by Adults Engaged in Similar Issues or Work. The idea of giving students work similar to adults—editing, translating, fundraising, public relations, web design, graphic design—is a strong first step in authenticity. But allowing them to tackle important issues that children and adults care about—poverty,

education, helping those in need—is necessary to really connect to the adult world. Children are capable of so much compassion. They want to take on big issues and they want an adult audience for their work. This year and last, the communications committees were flooded with e-mails from adults offering support, donations, and news media connections. One highlight of the project was when students appeared on the NBC San Diego morning show to talk about the project and to promote their book. It was amazing to see how thoughtfully students responded in their interviews. Being taken seriously by adults who were concerned with the same issues made the students' work much more meaningful.

Students have Access to Appropriate Technology, Tools, and Materials. What seems to strike students right away about the project is that the book is really published. Not bound together at school, but published like the books they see at the store or in the library. Their faces light up when they find out that they will be able to buy the book online. They are even more excited when they learn that anyone can purchase the book at Barnes & Noble or Amazon. Using the same technology as adult designers and publishers to create a professional-looking product was a huge motivator for students.

Students See a Reason for What They are Doing Beyond Getting a Grade. After introducing students to the project and the work that would be involved, I asked them to journal about their excitement and their worries. One student wrote, "I am kind of scared of this project because I'm afraid that if I mess up on my part people will get kind of mad. I am also afraid that if I mess up on the facts it will accidentally get published and people will get wrong information on the Mayans." It is fantastic to have students care about the accuracy of their work, not for the grade, but because the work serves a larger purpose. Last year, students knew that the money they raised would enable Mayan kids to go to school. This year, students knew that it was up to them to continue to sponsor these same kids. My students saw pictures of these boys and girls. They had those faces as reasons for doing well. They understood that real people would be affected by what they produced.

The Work is Structured to Emulate High Performance Work Environments. If I learned anything from my fourth grade class it was that students love simulations of the adult world. But they also can see when there is no real connection, when the simulation is more make-believe than real life. By asking students to apply for jobs and to publish and promote a book, students saw their work mirror that of adult professionals. In the persuasive cover letters that accompanied their job applications, students described their qualifications with eloquence, clarity, and detail. They knew that their writing had the power to get them the job they desired. They also knew that each position was fundamental to the publication of the book. The editors did all the editing; the graphic designers created the cover; the public relations committee contacted news agencies. Each student's expertise, and ability to work with others, was valued and contributed to the success of the work environment.

I love to hear that students are excited or worried about the exact same things I am. During this project, we were all scared that we wouldn't make enough money or that we would print a mistake. We cared about the quality of our work and the effort we put in because the work mattered. It had value outside the school, was taken seriously by adults, and asked students to work in the same ways adults do. Most importantly, the accountability for producing something beautiful did not come from me. It came from

outside the classroom and from within the students themselves. All I had to do was design an authentic project!

References

Steinberg, Adria (1997). *Real Learning, Real Work*. New York: Routledge.

For more information about the Maya Community Project, visit Heather Riley's digital portfolio at <http://dp.hightechhigh.org/~hriley/>