CENTRAL ASIAN JOURNAL OF TRANSLATION STUDIES

№ 4(1) 2018

#4

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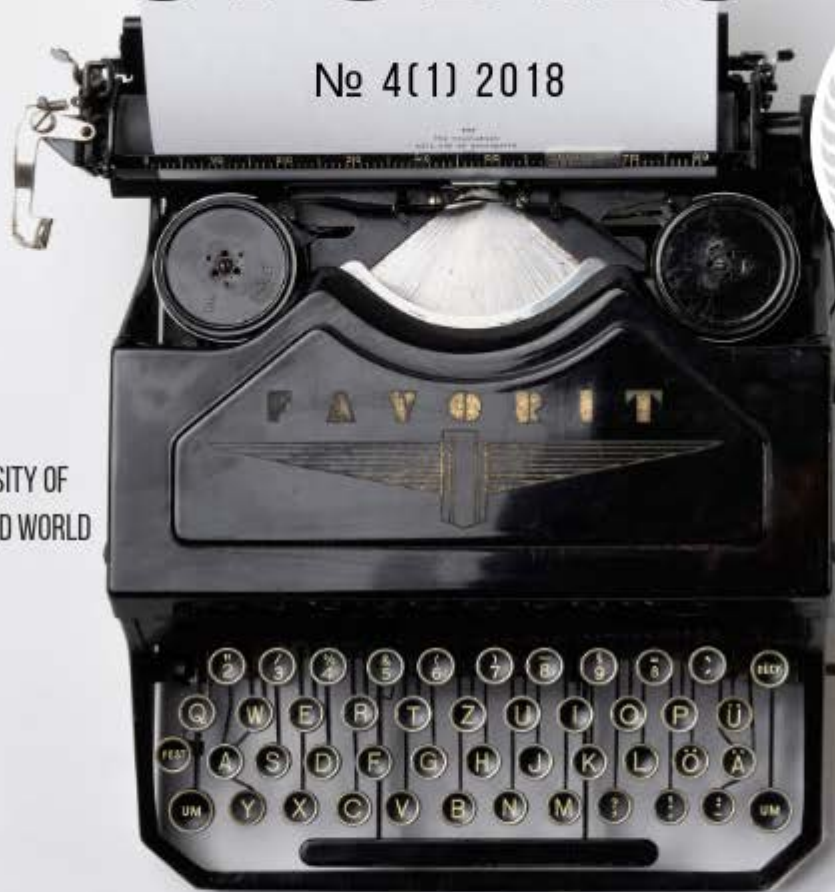
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AUTHENTIC LEARNING:
A GATE WAY TO KEEPING STUDENTS INVOLVED

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Abstract: Learning-by-doing is generally considered the most effective way to learn. The sequence of steps for developing the classroom and assessment procedures discussed hereby makes it possible to offer students authentic learning experiences ranging from experimentation to real-world problem solving. This white paper explores what constitutes authentic learning and provides a starting point for thinking about how to change the classroom into an authentic learning arena.

Keywords: education, learning, teaching, authentic, materials, curriculum, design

"From the standpoint of a learner, the great waste in any educational institute comes from his inability to utilize the experience he gets outside while on the other hand he is unable to apply in daily life what he has been learning. That is the isolation of the --its isolation from life." [1, p.117]

As educators, it is necessary to examine the issues surrounding how learning can help students succeed in a life outside of the classroom. The questions become overwhelming. How do we help students get past preoccupation with the next test? How do we express our interest in them learning more than facts and figures? How do we get them to become students of life and for life rather than students worried about the next "5"? One way to address these concerns is to incorporate authentic learning into our classrooms.

What is authentic learning?

Authentic learning typically focuses on real-world, complex problems and their solutions, using role-playing exercises, problem-based activities, case studies, and participation in virtual communities of practice. The learning environments are inherently multidisciplinary. [2, p.78] Going beyond content, authentic learning intentionally brings into play multiple disciplines, multiple perspectives, ways of working, habits of mind, and community.

According to Marilyn students immersed in authentic learning activities cultivate the kinds of "portable skills" that newcomers to any discipline have the most difficulty acquiring on their own:

• The *judgment* to distinguish reliable from unreliable information
• The *patience* to follow longer arguments
• The *synthetic ability* to recognize relevant patterns in unfamiliar contexts
• The *flexibility* to work across disciplinary and cultural boundaries to generate innovative solutions.

Breaking through traditional educational models is not always easy, but as Sartre writes, "authenticity consists in having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in

assuming the responsibilities and risks that it involves in accepting it in pride or humiliation, sometimes in horror or hate." Information presented as important 'for its own sake' or because 'it will be on the test,' carries little weight with students when they have nothing at stake in the work. We fail to help students develop as thinkers and give them no chance to apply their inherent skills and talents to problems both within and beyond the classroom. Worse, often we ignore the importance of what our students bring with them into the classroom. That is – what they already know. Instead, we seek to finish the chapter, to teach the next skill, to test that they have "learned" the material. As teachers we fail to make the connections clear to them that, they study has a purpose and importance out in the "real world" of work and life.

Authentic learning is learning designed to connect what students are taught in school to real-world issues, problems, and applications; learning experiences should mirror the complexities and ambiguities of real life. Children work towards production of discourse, products, and performances that have value or meaning beyond success in school; this is learning by doing approach.

It was once said that 'education is what survives when what has been learned has been forgotten' (New methods and new aims in teaching, 1964). Experiences that do not encourage the children to make meaning from their learning will quickly be forgotten. Any learning experience should aim to instill authenticity into every task, lesson and unit to ensure that 'students are able to develop problem-solving skills and confidence in their own learning abilities' [3, p.80]. It is only with a confidence that children are then able to use the skills and knowledge learned beyond the classroom walls.

To prepare students for life outside school, we need to develop children who can make meaning of their learning; this is done by making links between previous learning and new learning, from one subject to another. Research at Canterbury Christ Church University has found that placing 'each learner's personal quest for meaning at the heart of curricular and pedagogical decisions, is one most likely to generate the resilient communities needed to face a future of unimaginable challenge and change' [4, p.162]. Neither our lives, nor our jobs, are compartmentalized and sectioned into subjects. In order to reflect the real world, authentic learning takes a truly cross-curricular approach in its design as well as implementation in the classroom. There are ten design elements that learning researchers believe represent the 'essence' of authentic learning. According to these researchers, each learning experience should have [4, p.163–179].

1. Real life relevance Activities and tasks that represent those of a professional as closely as possible.

2. An ill-defined problem Challenges that are not easily solvable, or don't have an obvious answer. There may be layers of tasks that need to be completed in order to solve the problem.

3. Sustained investigation Projects and tasks that require a significant investment of time and cannot be solved in a matter of minutes or hours.

4. Multiple sources and perspectives Resources may be theoretical or practical, and may require learners to distinguish useful information from irrelevant information.

Goals of authentic learning

To use authentic learning in the classroom, at university we need to use a new system of thinking as teachers. Our goals for learning must change to meet the demands society is placing on our students – with emphasis on critical thinking and troubleshooting problems using materials and tools we have at hand. More than recitation of facts, students need to be equipped to analyze problems and evaluate possible solutions in order to decide upon the best course of action. Thus, authentic learning encourages the growth of intellectual curiosity by allowing students to:

• become active and engaged learners;

• use their own prior knowledge and add knowledge from diverse sources appropriate to the problem at hand;

• create tools appropriate for the culture and problem to be solved – new thinking skills must be employed to create visions of possibilities;

• discuss their own understanding of a problem with other learners;

• think about and solve real problems in the world in which they live;

• research and investigate phenomenon in the world around them in which they are truly interested;

• and understand the relationship between human beings and their environment. [adapted from *Authentic Learning*, March, 2006]

These goals demand a new thinking process on the part of the teacher. Our methods must move into realms where we may be uncomfortable with a loss of control over what happens next in the classroom. We must be flexible and willing to become an adventurer with our students in the process of learning. Surprises and unexpected discoveries can become a routine part of the authentic learning classroom if we seek joy not in authority and compliance, but in discovery and inquest.

Why is authentic learning beneficial?

Every day, in both our professional and personal lives, we come up against unfamiliar situations in which we have to solve problems, adapt our own behaviors and make decisions. We do this by utilizing and manipulating the knowledge we already have, drawing upon our experiences and skills to guide our choices and help us to determine our next steps within the context of the situation we find ourselves in. Authentic learning aims to equip students with these essential life skills, to show the connection between learning and real-life and to give students the problem solving abilities that they require for life beyond school.

Along with this, authentic learning experiences give students the opportunity to address the three goals of learning: acquisition, making meaning and transfer (AMT). The AMT model in Figure 1 illustrates how these three processes are interrelated:

By designing learning experiences with relevance and authenticity,

teachers can plan occasions for all three of these goals to be realized, allowing teachers to become 'coaches of understanding, not mere purveyors of content or activity' [5, p.76]. In the AMT model in Figure 1, understanding cannot be told; it is constructed by the learner and transferred independently between tasks or activities.
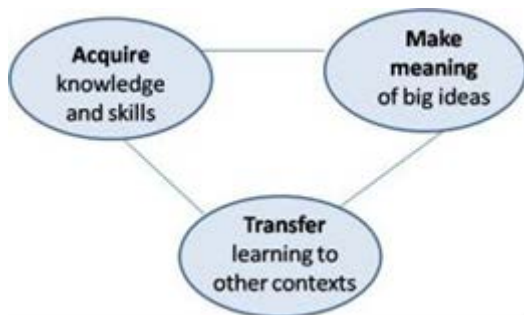

Figure 1: The AMT Model (McTighe, 2010)

Further to this, authentic learning is able to change the dynamics of the learning environment, to '[break] down the barriers of the classroom and the power hierarchies within it' [6, p78-79], encouraging learning communities and connections among both peers and staff. Learning along with the students about a topic with which you may not be familiar models learning behaviours in a way that students do not see in other learning pedagogies.

When thoughtfully designed, authentic learning experiences can help teachers in their assessment of, and for, learning. Building in ongoing assessment, teacher led as well as peer and self-assessment, is an added benefit for teachers and students; assessment becomes a part of the learning process, a formative tool to drive next steps, rather than an added extra at the end of a unit that generates data yet has no meaningful impact on learning.

More than anything else, authentic learning experiences generate engagement with students. Think about it – how many times in your own schooling did you ask the teacher, 'Why are we learning this?' or 'When am I going to use this in real life?' Authenticity automatically gives relevanceto the learning journey; relevance encourages engagement and enthusiasm, which should bring about meaningful learning.

Steps in developing an authentic learning environment

"Activity, concept, and culture are interdependent. No one can be totally understood without the other two. Learning must involve all three." [7, p 32-35]

Higher education should include the conative domain instructors that provide engaging activities supported by the proper scaffolding can help students develop expertise across all four domains of learning:

• Cognitive capacity to think, solve problems, and create

• Affective capacity to value, appreciate, and care

• Psychomotor capacity to move, perceive, and apply physical skills

• Conative capacity to act, decide, and commit.

Researchers warn that higher education has focused for too long on inculcating and assessing those cognitive skills that are relatively easy to acquire—remembering, understanding, and applying—rather than the arguably more important skills of analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Moreover, in developing these lower-

order thinking skills, educators have largely ignored the other major learning domains, particularly the conative, which determines whether a student has the necessary will, desire, commitment, mental energy, and self-determination to actually perform at the highest disciplinary standards.

Some tips for transforming a classroom into an authentic learning center include:

1. You become the coach for learning activities. The students are now in control of their learning and it is important that you not take that power away from them. You also do not leave them stranded without a leader when they reach a point that they need help.

2. Ease your way into it. You do not have to make a complete transformation today. You are also participating in a learning project and it will take some time for you to become comfortable using a new way of thinking about your own teaching.

3. Get some help. Books and Internet sites have much information available about how to conduct authentic learning projects. You might also consider getting other teachers involved to help smooth the transition. More eyes and hands to help can make you less stressed during the first few days of the process.

4. You are learning, too. Moreover, this is what keeps us alive and growing as teachers. It gives a reason to enjoy each new class and each new activity. Give yourself time to think about what works and what to try differently next time. [8, p. 68-78]

How to design authentic learning experiences?

There is no set formula for the planning and design of authentic learning experiences. The guidance here should be used merely as that – guidance. As an educator, it is you who knows your students best, who knows what they need from their learning and can make decisions accordingly. Use your professional judgment as your best guide!

1. Get to know your students. What are their interests? What engages them? Determine their learning needs. For example, are they a group who performs well in written tasks but could work on speaking and listening skills, or vice versa? The needs and interests of your students should always be a starting point.

2. Based on your students, determine a possible project, goal or outcome. This is where relevance and authenticity come into play – link the outcome to something real life. It could be running a restaurant, publishing a book, creating a museum, solving an environmental issue or a number of other ideas. Many Project Based Learning (PBL) websites can give you ideas if you need a starting point.

3. Break down the skills that your students will need in order to complete the project or reach the outcome. Remember, these may be across a number of curriculum areas and can be matched to curriculum statements and objectives if necessary.

4. Pre-assess your students - how do they perform in these skills already? There are a number of ways to pre-assess, but the best approach is to speak to your students – what do they think they need? Giving the students a role in the design of their learning journey

helps to break down the 'hierarchy' and gives them ownership and control over their progress.

5. Make time for the AMT model – give students the opportunity to transfer previously learned skills (or skills they have learned for this outcome).

6. Teach, facilitate, coach, guide…and learn. Some skills will require discrete teaching in a traditional sense, then an opportunity to transfer. Others will be better suited to more student-led learning and exploration. Assess throughout the project; help students determine their own next steps. Model positive learning behaviours.

7. I personally believe that it is helpful for students to self-assess at the end of a project. What have they learned? What new skills do they now have? What would they like to learn more about?

There are some who would argue that true authenticity only comes when the outcome or goal is shared beyond the classroom; this may well be the case, but again, the first time authentic learning designer may see the idea of sharing beyond the classroom daunting. I think it should be said at this point that authentic learning experiences do not have to be all singing and dancing, which it may seem from the steps above. Start small and work towards the larger projects. The key is that they need to have relevance, some sort of application to the real world – larger-than-life outcomes are not always necessary and can actually be a deterrent when taking on this approach.

Authentic learning needs authentic assessment

In order to assess authentic learning, teachers must rethink how they perform the grading aspect of the classroom. A test may not be the most effective measure of student learning since a test does not always call for higher levels of thinking to be implemented. "Traditional tests tend to reveal only whether the student can recognize, recall or 'plug in' what was learned out of context." [9] Therefore, we must change our evaluation to include tasks that require:

• Use of knowledge actually gained by the student.

• The ability for the "answer" to more than just one set of facts and statements. It should be an original piece of writing, an oral performance using new skills, a group project that requires everyone contribute to the final product.

• Time to review the product and revise so that the best possible example of student learning is exhibited. [9]

• Our stated goals for learning are reflected by what we ask students to accomplish. Recitation of facts does not show understanding and ability to use knowledge. [10, p.123-136]

Conclusions

From the standpoint of the child, the great waste in school comes from his inability to utilize the experience he gets outside while on the other hand he is unable to apply in daily life what he is learning in school. That is the isolation of the school--its isolation from life.

The outcome of any schooling or education system should be to send students into the world prepared for both their personal and professional lives – education and life should not be isolated from each other. However, we cannot teach our students everything. [11]

What we can do is teach our students to be adaptable and creative thinkers who are able to utilise the skills and knowledge they do have to create new solutions to problems. By giving students the opportunity to learn through authentic, real life, relevant learning experiences, we are giving them the ability to apply their learning, to learn through doing, to see their abilities, to adapt and change, and to form the habits required to do this successfully in their lives beyond school.

As teachers, we must be held responsible for the part we play in how the next generation lives and forms the new world. By incorporating authentic learning into our classrooms we give our students the opportunity to take on real challenges instead of textbook models. This allows them to think creatively and critically, necessary skills in an ever-changing world.

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ТІКЕЛЕЙ ҮЙРЕНУ: СТУДЕНТТЕРДІ ҚОРҒАУҒА АРНАЛҒАН ШЕШІМ.

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Аннотация: Оқу арқылы оқыту, әдетте, үйренудің ең тиімді әдісі болып табылады. Мұнда талқыланған аудитория мен бағалау рәсімдерін әзірлеу қадамдарының жүйелілігі студенттерге эксперименттерден нақты проблемаларды шешуге дейін шынайы оқыту тәжірибесін ұсынуға мүмкіндік береді. Бұл техникалық құжат түпнұсқадағы оқытуды қарастырады және сыныпты шынайы оқу алаңына айналдыру туралы ойлаудың бастапқы нүктесін ұсынады.

Түйінді сөздер: білім беру, оқыту, оқыту, шынайы материалдар, оқу жоспары, дизайн

АУТЕНТИЧНОЕ ОБУЧЕНИЕ: КАК СОХРАНИТЬ ВОВЛЕЧЕННОСТЬ СТУДЕНТОВ В ПРОЦЕСС ОБУЧЕНИЯ.

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Аннотация: Обучение на практике, как правило, считается наиболее эффективным способом обучения. Последовательность шагов для разработки классной комнаты и процедур оценки, обсуждаемых здесь, позволяет предлагать студентам подлинный опыт обучения, начиная от экспериментов и заканчивая реальным решением проблем. В этом техническом документе исследуется, что представляет собой подлинное обучение, и дается отправная точка для размышлений о том, как превратить классную комнату в подлинную учебную арену.

Ключевые слова: образование, обучение, преподавание, аутентичные, материалы, учебная программа, дизайн