Meeting Learners’ Needs through Project-Based Learning

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ABSTRACT

There is a significant divide between what students want and what students receive in the classroom. Students increasingly lack interest and motivation to participate and learn. Instructional practices within and across schools vary widely, creating inconsistencies. Teachers’ instructional plans may put content and curricular needs above individual student needs. For some, the lack of desire to learn causes them to leave school. However, project-based learning, a student-centered, inquiry-based activity set in a real-world context, which uses technological tools to produce real-world artifacts, may be the solution to this dilemma. Project-based learning motivates students to actively apply critical thinking skills for project planning, collaborative problem solving, and higher-order thinking. Project-based learning can motivate students because it requires students to take ownership of their projects and learning, employ real-world technological tools and skills, collaborate with peers, reflect continuously on the process and the project, and develop a solution to a complex problem.

Keywords: Critical Thinking Skills, Inquiry-Based Activities, Peer Collaboration, Project Planning, Project-Based Learning, Students

INTRODUCTION

Education has changed very little in the past 100 years. In describing classroom instruction, philosopher and educator John Dewey (1902/2001) stated, “the center of gravity is outside the child. It is in the teacher, the textbook, anywhere and everywhere you please except in the immediate instincts and activities of the child himself” (p. 23). Dewey’s statement supports what was believed to be one of the earliest purposes of educators. The teacher is the purveyor of knowledge. However, as students have changed, some teachers’ purposes and classrooms have not. Today, a number of classroom settings continue to seat students in neat rows of desks with the teacher at the front of the classroom. As a consequence of teacher-centered instruction, some schools find their classrooms filled with unmotivated students who are unwilling or unable to meet expected competencies.

Students have little input into their education and instruction while in school (Prensky, 2008). Within traditional, teacher-directed classrooms, students work alone on simple assignments, which often involve memorization. Some students only learn the content needed to prepare for a quiz or a test, but fail to internalize the information or retain it for the long term. The result is students do not control their learning. Unfortunately, for students, some teachers do not believe students know enough to be able
to determine what and how they should learn. Nevertheless, teachers are often concerned by student attitudes and overall lack of motivation to learn and participate in class activities. Some teachers do not understand that students want and need activities that are student-driven, authentic, relevant to them, based on real-world problems, and inquiry-based (Harada, Kirio, & Yamamoto, 2008).

The characteristically linear development of the curricula of the educational system in the United States may not be suitable for the needs of 21st century students (Richardson, 2006). These linear curricula could be creating boredom and interfering with students’ ability to understand the relationship between learning and skills needed for the workforce. Declining motivation to learn in school may prevent students from being prepared for life outside of school. After completing school, students enter a workplace that requires skills and abilities very different from those required of previous generations. In 1900, 95% of all jobs required only that an employee be able to follow directions (Darling-Hammond et al., 2008, p. 2). In 2008, most employees needed to have knowledge and skills specific to their job (Darling-Hammond et al., 2008, p. 2). Today, students must have the ability to research and retrieve specific kinds of information electronically. They need to be able to create new products, as well as apply a variety of knowledge to new problems and challenges (Bell, 2010).

The business climate of the early 21st century entails a focus on communication, collaboration, and effective use of data (Moylan, 2008). Business leaders are discovering that in a climate marked by widespread networking, it is better to cooperate rather than compete. Global collaboration requires students to be able to communicate information thoughtfully. The transition to a more global economy, an ever-changing social climate, and technological innovations will create a need for them to be lifelong learners. Characteristics inherent in project-based learning (PBL) require learners to use these skills and may address the problems associated with students’ lack of motivation to learn (Liu, Hsieh, Cho, & Shallert, 2006), as well as prepare them for a 21st century workplace (Bell, 2010).

According to Harada, Kirio, and Yamamoto (2008), “PBL inspires proactive learning. It is a model for classroom activity that shifts away from short, isolated, teacher-centered lessons and emphasizes learning activities that are long-term, interdisciplinary, student-centered, and integrated with real-world issues and practices” (p. 1). Project-based students actively construct knowledge in collaborative groups. Moreover, the roles of teacher and student interchange. The teacher becomes a facilitator, while students take a more active role in learning. The teacher’s role is to assist students in the learning process by posing open-ended questions that cause students to make their thinking visible and actively involved in the group process (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). Consequently, PBL may be an instructional method that causes students to be more motivated to learn.

**MOTIVATION TO LEARN**

Some researchers believe that motivation is the only element that directly affects students’ academic success and that all other elements influence academic success because of their effect on motivation (Khamis, Dukmak, & Elhoweris, 2008). Motivation is important in students as it affects many aspects of their learning. One of the most influential factors on school success or failure is student motivation. A willingness to tackle learning tasks, exerting the necessary energy and time, and sustaining adequate effort are essential for successful learning outcomes. Researchers such as Pintrich and DeGroot (1990), Wigfield and Wentzel (2007), and Yair (2000) have found that motivation to learn correlates with academic success.

Motivation is a driving force behind the way students learn, how they perform, and the kind of objectives they set. Most teachers not only attempt to impart knowledge upon, as well as build skills within, their students, but also create motivation to care about what
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