

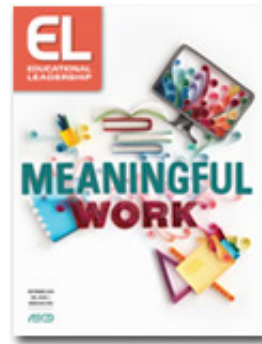
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Giving Students Meaningful Work Pages 55-58

Solving Problems That Count

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Give students autonomy, purpose, and opportunity for mastery—then watch them change the world.



It's spring 2010, and my 26 seniors are inquiring into such topics as poverty; child abuse; New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina; global citizenship; loving relationships; the immigrant experience; school shootings; and how people in South Korea and Ireland cope with their historical, political, and religious inheritances. Individually and collaboratively, the students have created and pursued questions focused on addressing—and solving—environmental, social, and political concerns in the world today.

This inquiry and action project takes place within the context of my English class and as a meaningful remake of the traditional term paper. My students still write a college-level paper in which they synthesize information drawn from a variety of sources, and literature is still the foundation of this paper, but students now read books not only as works of art but also as source material for problem solving. Reading literature, consulting other sources, and writing the paper have become stepping stones to action, as students devise and implement social action projects that they share at an in-school inquiry and action fair as well as with other authentic audiences.

Motivating and Meaningful

In *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* (Riverhead Books, 2009), Daniel Pink offers compelling support for the notion that human beings are motivated by autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Pink shows how these forces drive both individuals and companies to high levels of achievement—how, for example, Google's practice of "20 percent time," which gives employees the equivalent of one day each week to spend on projects of their choice, has led to some of Google's most successful products. If they choose and control their projects, and are driven by a sense of purpose, people will, Pink asserts, dedicate tremendous time and effort to mastering a task.

What's true in the real world is, of course, also true in the classroom. When offered degrees of autonomy, mastery, and purpose, students will engage more fully with their learning. Yet let's be truthful: All too frequently, we ask students to learn without autonomy, without opportunity for mastery, and without purpose. So how can we use these forces to create more meaningful learning experiences for our students?

Four years ago, I attended a lecture by Peter Senge, a major figure in organizational thinking and the developer of the notion of the *learning organization*.¹ Senge challenged an audience of educators to think about how we could shift from a 20th century industrial model of education to a 21st century model that engages students with solving world problems.

Senge's challenge encouraged me to think about how I could make such a shift in teaching English. Before then, I had thought little about problem solving in the English classroom, and I wasn't very involved in conversations about 21st century skills or multidisciplinary learning. Senge helped me become a 21st century teacher—that is, a teacher of 21st century learners in a 21st century world in which powerful new technologies support collaboration, provide a venue where students have a voice, and

enable increased access to information.

Setting the Stage for Inquiry and Action

I set the stage for this work by exposing students to 21st century thinkers, such as Thomas Friedman (author of *The World Is Flat*) and Daniel Pink; to the big ideas of the likes of Albert Einstein, Thomas Edison, Maxine Greene, and Margaret Mead; and to theories of intelligence and of self from such well-known thinkers as Howard Gardner, Carl Jung, and Sigmund Freud. We also view inspirational TED talks (www.ted.com), which feature experts from a wide range of disciplines sharing groundbreaking ideas and research.

This year, my advanced placement (AP) literature and composition students added another important element to this foundational work to spur on their sense of agency: They read Tracy Kidder's creative nonfiction book, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, which focuses on humanitarian Dr. Paul Farmer and his health care work in Haiti. The students read the book soon after Haiti's January 2010 earthquake. In *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, Kidder beautifully paints a portrait of how one human being can contribute to solving problems in the world. Such a book can be a powerful springboard into student inquiry and action.

In a recent essay reflecting on Kidder's book, Jenna wrote, "I am just too lazy and have not yet felt any sort of burning passion inside me to change the world. That is, I was that way until I read *Mountains Beyond Mountains*." Ciara seconded that sentiment: "Farmer cares for and cures people who are often neglected, and Kidder uses his love of writing to create a beautiful story that people can learn from and use as a framework for their own goals, as I have." Sarah, who had recently read Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and who was planning to read Jonathan Kozol's *The Shame of the Nation* as part of her inquiry into urban education, wrote,

I will be different. Maybe not to the extent of Paul Farmer, but I will *change* at least one part of urban America. I will not be quiet. I will take what I learned, in my life and in *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, to strive for something better, to not be afraid to take risks. My vision will come true.

My high school seniors and I became pioneers in this shared inquiry in fall 2007. For the first two years, my students worked on this project in a two-semester course focused on psychology and literature (fall semester) and war and literature (spring semester). This year, we're working in an AP literature and composition class.

Student Projects

Although I recommend to my students that they read imaginative literature before moving on to other sources, I am flexible about the processes that students use to pursue their inquiry. Here are a few of their journeys.

Calvin: Rescuing the Environment

Calvin is examining the relationship between humans and the earth and is eager to start reading Rachel Carson's groundbreaking *Silent Spring*, which documents the detrimental effects of pesticides on the environment, particularly on birds. After that, he is moving on to T. C. Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth*, a novel about environmental destruction set in 2025. Then, he plans to read scientific articles on humans' impact on the earth and to research how humans can have a more positive effect. His next step is to revisit notes from a Fossil Fuels and Global Change class he took last summer at Columbia University, where he will attend college in the fall. After writing his term paper, for his action component, Calvin

wants to share his research with others and participate in some "going green" projects through Rock 'n' Renew (<http://rocknrenew.com>), a nonprofit organization that focuses on environmentally sustainable living.

Michelle: What It's Like to Be Hearing-Impaired

Michelle, who is intensely curious about the experience of life with a disability, decided to learn sign language as part of her inquiry so that she could experience firsthand this type of communication and teach others how to sign. After reading *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (in which one of the main characters is deaf) and *A Loss for Words* and after witnessing members of the school community, led by the Gay-Straight Alliance, participate in a day of silence, Michelle designed her own action research:

I recently took my own "day of silence" to try to replicate what a day is like for deaf/mute people unable to use words. I took notes and jotted down my thoughts throughout the day. By the end of the day, I felt depressed, alone, and unable to get out of a bad mood. I was made fun of for not speaking (people called me "stupid" for actually caring about my term paper), but I could not stand up for myself and explain why I was silent unless I wrote it out or mouthed it, which eventually became exhausting. I felt like I was being left out of conversations and discussions because people knew that I wouldn't respond with my words. That "silent" experience really moved me and provided me with further insight into the minds of deaf/mute people.

A fellow teacher and I were able to connect Michelle with a hearing-impaired student, Amanda, who has cochlear implants. Now Michelle and Amanda are pen pals; through this exchange, Michelle is learning about the personal experience of hearing impairment.

Mor: Understanding Conflict in the Middle East

Michelle's decision to learn sign language inspired her classmate, Mor, to study Arabic as part of his inquiry into the understandings and misunderstandings between the Arab and Western worlds. Mor, an Israeli citizen, is especially interested in the role of literature in understanding politics in the Middle East today.

Mor started his reading with *Children of Gebelawi* by Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz, which looks at the entangled history of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. That book led him to *Offence: The Muslim Case* by Pakistani writer Kamila Shamsie and to *The Prophet* by Lebanese-American writer Khalil Gibran. Mor also plans to read at least one book by British-American historian and scholar Bernard Lewis, who has written extensively about the history of Islam. Of his inquiry Mor says, "I'm just figuring it out as I go along."

Liz: What Africa Has Endured

The learning momentum created by choice and self-direction, by engagement with issues in the world, and by the opportunity to build on prior learning and reading can often be astounding. Before reading Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Liz reflected,

Africa has been doomed ... because of its wretched history of colonization. I would like to know more about this, including the attitude of the West toward Africa, during and after the colonial period. I want to read stories of oppression, racial discord, and slavery. I want to be able to relate these stories to books I have read, such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Color Purple*. I want to then pick out a novel in which I can pinpoint the many themes of civilization versus slavery, developed versus third-world [countries]. After that, I want to

fully understand the history of the "Greatest Game" [of colonization] and how the second slice-and-dice of decolonization stimulated complete disaster for whole tribes, villages, and cultures. Perhaps then I will be able to connect all of this to how this disaster ended in genocide for several of those diced-up countries.

These questions have been circling around in Liz's mind for many years— and now this project is giving her the opportunity to look for the answers. As for action, Liz volunteers as an emergency medical technician and intends to dedicate her professional life to providing health care in Africa. Recently accepted into nursing school at Boston College, she hopes to work with Doctors Without Borders.

Taking Action

After taking their AP exam and as they compose their term papers in May, my students express excitement—not only about the upcoming prom but also about the inquiry and action fair we're planning and their various action projects.

Students from the class of 2008, who helped me develop this model, set many excellent examples for students to follow. Among them was Gal's advocacy work to make our school more environmentally responsible, which resulted in the placement of recycling containers around the school. Another student, Adi, used his film-making skills to help Gal make a video in which Gal encouraged his peers to ride their bicycles to school and recycle their plastic water bottles (see www.youtube.com/watch?v=owGveDwcfuE). As his action project, Adi created a video documentary of the class's work (see www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZmuxmOufzXA).

Allie, who is now studying to be an elementary teacher, wanted to raise awareness about child abuse and to help abused children in the area. Through donations at the inquiry and action fair, as well as through a school bake sale that she organized, Allie raised money that she donated to the Audrey Hepburn Children's House at New Jersey's Hackensack Hospital. Along with her donation, Allie sent a film that she made about child abuse and the work of the Audrey Hepburn Children's House.

Some successful action projects have been collaborative. A group of students who had researched different topics related to social and emotional issues found common ground for an action project around the notion of peer pressure. Together, the six students created a website on which they share facts and advice about how teens can resist peer pressure; they also created a commercial, drama, and digital story, all of which feature their writing, speaking, acting, and drawing. Their digital action project is viewable at www.wix.com/woonujung/war-on-peer-pressure.

In addition to creating informational websites, blogs, videos, and awareness-raising campaigns, students have become involved in a variety of activities:

- Volunteering at local hospitals, schools, and shelters as well as at remote sites, including Habitat for Humanity sites in New Orleans.
- Producing films (such as the student film on saving children in Africa at www.youtube.com/watch?v=vtlzxx1-3w).
- Reading aloud their creative writing on such topics as the positive role of communication in relationships.
- Producing a Relay for Life event (a fund-raising event of the American Cancer Society).
- Pursuing legislative actions, such as petitioning the state government to require training on racial profiling for all police officers.

Students have shared their work at in-school inquiry fairs, as guest speakers in various classrooms, and as presenters at such venues as board of education meetings.

Finally, taking Gandhi's words to heart, teams of students speak on the topic of "being the change they wish to see in the world." All my students are determined to enact change, and they all believe they are capable of doing so, both now and in the future.

Real 21st Century Learning

The results of this project underscore what Daniel Pink and Peter Senge have so clearly articulated: Students want to make choices, be directed by purpose, and master content—and schools can offer students meaningful learning experiences by having them play a role in solving the world's problems. In doing so, we release the potential in our students, make effective use of 21st century literacy tools, and create learning experiences that are deeply meaningful for both our students and our world.

Endnote

¹ See Senge's books, *Schools That Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents, and Everyone Who Cares about Education* (Doubleday, 2000) and *Presence: Exploring Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society* (Doubleday, 2005).

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