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ABSTRACT

Participatory classroom instruction, including project-based learning, is a teaching approach that can motivate students to learn, build the academic competencies needed to pass the General Educational Development (GED) Test, and instill the strong self-concept and interpersonal skills needed to succeed. Project-based learning actively engages students in their learning experience. Instead of creating and directing exercises for passive students, instructors become coaches, facilitators, and sounding boards for student ideas. By working together to develop, critique, implement, and assess projects having relevance to their lives, students become problem solvers and develop the thought processes needed to assess and evaluate information on the GED test. One instructor of an open-entry GED class for welfare recipients managed to motivate her students to master the skills required to pass the GED through two learning projects: (1) students produced a handbook to help returning students on public assistance feel more comfortable returning to school; and (2) adult students spoke to middle school students about how dropping out of schools had affected their lives. Both projects illustrated how project-based learning provides students with durable learning skills and a broader understanding of their place in the world. (MN)

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Project-based Learning: Moving Students Through the GED With Meaningful Learning

For those of us who teach the G.E.D. classes in our programs we know that students come into class with a variety of needs. When asked why they have come back to school, invariably, the answer is, "To get my G.E.D." Students come to class with a very specific goal. However, we as teachers realize there are a variety of less defined needs our students must obtain in order to transition successfully into work or higher education; obtaining their G.E.D. is not enough. Having strong self-esteem, the ability to work within a team and the motivation to take on new challenges are just some of the areas adults need to excel in the twenty-first century. How can we provide these diverse, and difficult to teach areas to our students while at the same time help them achieve their immediate goal of passing the G.E.D.?

More familiar to the E.S.L. classroom[1], participatory classroom instruction, including project-based learning, is a teaching approach that G.E.D. classrooms can use to build the academic competencies needed to pass the G.E.D. *and* instill the strong self-concept and interpersonal skills needed to succeed into the twenty-first century. From a teacher's perspective, this article will address the "who, what, how and why " of

[1] See chapter two of Heide Spruch Wrigley and Gloria Guth's Bringing Literacy To Life: Issues and Options in Adult ESL Literacy (San Diego: Dominie Press Inc., 1992) for a thorough account of a variety of classroom approaches which emphasize student participation and meaningful learning. Elsa Roberts Auerbach's Making Meaning Making Change (McHenry: Center for Applied Linguistics and Delta Systems Inc., 1992) is also indispensable on these points.

implementing a project-based approach within a traditional G.E.D. classroom. The perspective will be that of mixing old, traditional approaches with new, untried methods. For both teachers and students a traditional, teacher-centered approach to instruction is, perhaps, the most comfortable. Rather than reinventing the wheel and scrapping our old methods, the emphasis will be on mixing and blending the two approaches, taking what is effective in both and creating a classroom environment that puts both students and teachers at ease.

A Teacher's Perspective

Two years ago I was hired to teach a J.O.B.S. (Job Opportunities and Basics Skills) T.A.N.F. (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) class for Northside Independent School District in San Antonio, Texas. Previously, I had been teaching western humanities classes to freshman and sophomores at Florida State University and thus had no training teaching under-prepared adults. The Hispanic single mothers who made up the majority of my J.O.B.S. class live in a world were poverty, domestic violence, physical and mental abuse and, often times, brushes with the law are a commonality. Though I knew that the lecture approach I used in the university would be impossible because of the multilevel nature of the class, I was still most comfortable with a teacher-centered classroom and adopted an approach where students silently studied individual subjects of the G.E.D. test using commercial G.E.D. textbooks while I provided individual instruction. At the time, I was teaching alongside E.S.L. classes and remembered seeing exciting, participatory learning taking place. When I returned to my G.E.D. class, I would find it quiet and sullen; books were open; learning was going on, but just how much?

Within my class, I found students usually fell into roughly three categories: many times students entered, quickly gained their G.E.D. and, just as

quickly, moved on. While we may count this as success for our program goals, we often feel that the student may still not be adequately prepared to enter the workplace or college. Other students came to class needing a good deal of remediation, especially in writing. After diligently working for months with commercially prepared G.E.D. books, they often found themselves burned out and frustrated. What motivation they had slowly ebbed away. Finally, there were the students who entered my class requiring a good deal of remediation, but who lacked the motivation and confidence needed to take their first steps toward their goals. These students were my greatest challenge.

I found the teacher-centered/textbook approach to be somewhat successful in moving high-level students through the G.E.D., yet I felt frustrated in my efforts to motivate and educate the students who required more remediation. Months of diligent work writing essays from G.E.D. textbook prompts or studying in a science book often left them burned out and frustrated. In addition, I felt most students who left class, with or without their G.E.D., still lacked the self-esteem, motivation and teamwork skills needed to get off public assistance and successfully enter the workforce.

In one way or another, these concerns are familiar to many G.E.D. instructors. In addition, it seems our students' needs change from one class to the next. What worked well a month ago, seems to be ineffective with the next group of students. We are constantly grappling with new ways to meet the various challenges of academic remediation, increased motivation and low self-esteem.

My frustration was partially relieved with my introduction to an innovative lifeskills curriculum created as part of a Texas Education Agency special project grant. The curriculum stressed reading and writing activities

confidence and motivation by encouraging students to work together toward their academic and life goals. My quiet classroom began to give way to an excited, open community of learners. By connecting class activities to my students' world, a world uncomfortably mixed with oppression and violence as well as hope and vision, I was able to increase my students' motivation to learn and help them better define themselves. Though their ages, educational backgrounds and race varied, their "common denominators" became the backbone for instruction.

Even though I felt I had made considerable progress creating a dynamic learning environment, I still had trouble motivating some students to learn. I felt that there must be a way to better tailor a classroom environment that better promoted learning.

In 1996, I joined a cadre of adult education teachers to explore innovative teaching techniques as part of a state funded professional development project. A major objective of the project was to implement a student project in our class. Though class projects seemed like an exciting idea, I never thought that they could be a viable means of producing the more defined skills needed to pass G.E.D. tests. Our initial meeting with the project director Barbara J. Baird and education consultant Heide Spruck Wrigley was spent defining the theory and discussing methods of implementation. [2] While the approach seemed exciting, I had reservations on how a class project could be tied to the G.E.D. competencies and how my students, who are often very "test driven," would react to the idea.

Project-based Learning

It is no secret that students learn better and are more actively engaged in

[2] See Wrigley's article, "All of Us Together Are Smarter Than Any One of Us Alone: the Promise of Project-based Learning Based Learning," *Focus on Basics.* forthcoming December 1998.

learning when they have a concrete, meaningful goal to aim for. In addition, learning does not naturally occur in discrete, separate exercises but instead makes its greatest strides when the learning experience demands a variety of cognitive skills which incorporate the student's own individual experiences.

Project-based activities focus learning on the students' lives rather than on the academic curriculum associated with the G.E.D. It allows students to become actively engaged in their learning experience; the instructor takes a backseat while students initiate, facilitate, evaluate and produce a meaningful project. Instead of creating and directing exercises for passive students, instructors become coaches, facilitators, and sounding boards for student ideas. As a teacher, I consistently listen for issues that really engage the class. This "conscious listening" helps me identify key issues that are important to my students. I can then use these issues as catalysts for student activities or projects. [3] Rather than trying to "teach" students how to be critical thinkers by providing readings and writing samples on the Louisiana Purchase or cellular mitosis from G.E.D. textbooks, I take themes that are important to them and help them create activities that develop strong thinking and language skills. Students interact as a group, to develop, critique, implement and assess a project that has relevance to their lives. Since the focus is relevant, learning becomes natural, unforced and engaging. Students become problem solvers on issues that touch their lives and the lives of their families rather than passive recipients of information that has little meaning to them outside the classroom. The thought processes needed to critically assess and evaluate information on the G.E.D. test are developed, while students become engaged in an activity linked to their daily lives. Students work, not to simply pass a test, but to create change or add

[3] Auerbach (note 1) pg. 43. Chapter 4 of this book, "Ways In: Finding Student Themes" provides some very useful tips on locating issues important to your students.

refined meaning to their world.

What Does a Class Project Look Like?

Our First Project

Students in my open-entry class are mandated to attend class twenty-five hours a week to receive their welfare benefits; thus we provide five hours of instruction per day, five days a week. As "test-driven" as my students can be, they rarely study for their G.E.D. tests five hours a day; after some diligent work in the morning, they usually are less productive in the afternoons and turn to reading magazines, chatting and even sleeping if they have spent a long night with a sick child. When I undertook this new teaching initiative based on project-based learning, I was hoping that we could make the afternoons more productive by using them for project time.

Much to my surprise, my class was very excited when I introduced the idea of spending our afternoons working on a project. I think part of my success in turning them from more traditional work lay in the way I introduced the idea. Rather than "telling" the class we were going to do projects in the afternoon, I "asked" them if they had any ideas that might improve the class and add some "spice" to our usually slow afternoons. I briefly mentioned the idea of working up a class project and at the same time passed around a book of student poems compiled by another class. All but two of my twenty students were interested, and ideas on what we could do began to emerge.

That year my class produced a new-student handbook designed to help returning students on public assistance feel more comfortable coming

back to school. The idea came from two new students who suggested we make a "one-stop resource" outlining A.F.D.C. requirements and containing information on the G.E.D. test.

The project was a great success for all; students excitedly compiled a useful handbook, and I was pleased by the amount of quality essay writing and editing skills gained in the process. Student's edited each other's work and commented that they enjoyed debating and arguing over points of grammar rather than using worksheets to gain the knowledge. Since the handbook was designed for and by J.O.B.S. students, the class really began to grow as a community. Students realized they had common hardships and concerns; new friendships arose, and students enjoyed working together to solve new problems. When we turned from the project to more traditional G.E.D. work, there was a new sense of motivation and excitement in the classroom.

Our final product was a thirty-four-page orientation booklet entitled R.U.L.E.R. (Reaching Ultimate Leadership Education Results). The booklet provides useful information on many questions new students often have questions about. Among these are A.F.D.C. regulations, day care and transportation information, G.E.D. test hints and counseling services. Most importantly, students included personal stories meant to boost self-esteem and confidence, and let new students know that "they were not alone" in their experiences.

The extensive booklet ran over thirty pages, and, after students ran a class set on our copier, they realized how laborious copying and sorting the set was going to be. They asked me how we could get copies produced commercially, and I suggested possibly writing a grant to obtain copy costs. The students obtained bids for printing and binding the handbooks from three local copy shops, and I obtained some information

on grant writing and assisted them in preparing a proposal for funding to submit to the project director.

Much to their surprise, students obtained funding to print and bind sixty-five copies of the booklet. After a brief summer break, we received the bound copies of our student handbook. Only two students remained in our open-entry open-exit class who had been involved in creating it. The booklets made a strong impression on the new students, who, of course, it was designed for, and they became eager to "one up" the previous class with a new project. I was pleased by the motivation and had high hopes for the next project.

1997's Class Project

In 1997, my class took on a project that moved them from enriching their environment in the classroom to reaching out and becoming actively engaged in their community; a tall order, but one that evolved naturally within the class.

Last September, one student, Jennifer, suggested that our class go and give younger students advice on the dangers of dropping out of school. Dropping out and the unexpected pregnancy that often preceded it were factors that most of my students had in common. I saw a perfect opportunity to develop a powerful project. The potential for building self-esteem, teamwork and communication skills seemed limitless; plus there would be a good deal of demanding academic skills involved. Unfortunately, only about five of my sixteen students seemed really interested in something so gregarious. The interested students persisted, and, as ideas began to come together, more and more students began to chime in and provide input.

On the suggestion of Jennifer's casemanager, we found a contact at a local jr. high who was a counselor. The counselor came to hear my students' intentions and left very interested in hosting our presentation. The meeting was a true watershed. My class began to truly see the potential for the project. A counselor who at one time might have been a figure to be ducked and avoided at school, was now inviting them to use their experiences as a positive teaching tool for others. Two of my students had dropped out of this same school, so the significance, for them, was even more profound.

In class, we would spend anywhere from twenty minutes to a couple of hours working on the details of the project; the remainder of the class time would be spent focused on specific G.E.D. work. Some days, when we had poor attendance or more pressing needs to "cram" for G.E.D. tests, we would not work on the project at all. We assigned several students to be in charge of particular sections of the project so that when students were absent or left the class, progress on that section could continue. We kept an informal list of who was working on what and found it to be a successful way to manage the work.

The project seemed to be well underway when we ran into a glitch that brought it to a halt. Before Thanksgiving break we received a phone message confirming that we had approval to do a presentation, but that the topic of pregnancy could not be brought up. I tried to contact the counselor for clarification, but was told she was already out of her office for the break.

Even though my students range in age from their late teens to mid-thirties, early pregnancy had been a major contributor to my students' loss of education and opportunity. If they could not candidly advise

students on this point, how could they truly feel like they were making a difference? Despondent, we left for Thanksgiving break . The next week our class resumed, and, as I expected, work on the project ceased; my students had lost the impetus to continue.

Fortunately, I reached the counselor the following week and received some encouraging news. The controversy lay in the way we treated the subject of pregnancy. As long as the topic remained in the personal stories of my students, it was acceptable. We were, however, not allowed to direct questions to the students that pertained to premarital sex or contraception. Though it was an added challenge for our presentation, the stipulation allowed me to involve the class in some very real "social studies" and critical analysis of a point that is still controversial in the South, namely sex-education.

After several more weeks of dedicated rehearsal, my class delivered a series of presentations to students at Northside I.S.D.'s Anson Jones Middle School. Our presentations, entitled "Something to Think About,"[4] focused on the extreme hardships and almost insurmountable obstacles my students faced after dropping out of school. The presentations included a question/answer session on the realities of dropping out of school, a budgeting game which emphasized the impossibility of making it on minimum wage with no diploma, and concluded with personal testimony from my students. Here my students emphasized how drugs, gangs, abusive relationships, and, for some, jail, ultimately left many of them alone, confused, demoralized and unable to provide for their children.

[4] The project, "Something to Think About" has been published on the internet at: http://members.aol.com/CulebraMom/jrhigh.html

The presentations were a great success. Counselors, teachers and, most importantly, the young students themselves, congratulated my students. Imagine a scene where seventy 12-14 year old boys, many of whom are heading for gangs, are struck silent by a tale of abuse, alienation and abandonment told by a young woman only a few years older than themselves. My class had made a significant impression on a very impenetrable group.

Following the presentations, my students were overflowing with confidence and actively critiquing their performance while discussing what they wanted to do "next time." They demanded we schedule more presentations at other schools. The few students who had preferred to be "backstage" participants, facilitating the presentation, suddenly gained the confidence to volunteer their stories.

By addressing issues that were so close to their lives and recognizing the need to successfully "connect" with the students, my class worked like never before toward perfection. In a sense, they were creating their own curriculum to teach others. As they wrote down their autobiographies, rehearsed them in front of a borrowed video camera and rewrote them again and again, they developed the keen critical analysis and writing skills needed for the G.E.D. essay test. Because this was *their* life they were writing about, they went at it with a passion that a textbook or exam could never produce.

While creating the budgeting game, students gained solid math skills in truly contextual learning. What started out to be a simple process of adding and subtracting paychecks and debts became a lengthy lesson in finance supplemented with G.E.D. textbook work in percentages and decimals. Real-life problem solving entered the class: What exactly was the F.I.C.A. tax, and how do we figure it? What are fixed and flexible

payments? Is cable TV really a necessity?! Real-life debates became the topic of much figuring and refiguring until a consensus was found.

Besides academic remediation, my students started gaining the self-esteem, motivation and group interaction skills necessary for success in the workplace. Pat, a mother of four, successfully entered a highly competitive air conditioning and heating program taught by Texas A & M University just days after our presentations. Though very motivated on her own, Pat commented that working on the project helped boost her confidence, making the transition to a completely male vocational classroom less daunting. Now, several months later and still the only woman in the program, Pat has been appointed shop foreman over twenty-eight men in her class. I can't help but point to accomplishments like this as truly tangible examples of the intrinsic qualities gained from project work. Relying solely on the G.E.D. to ensure success is not realistic; a strong sense of personal responsibility, solid self-image and interpersonal skills are vital additions to the credential. By working as a team, my students were able to turn past mistakes into a positive learning experience for themselves and others.

Granted, this project was ambitious; implementing project-based activities in class need not be so intensive. Students usually find it easy to write about their families. Using inexpensive three-ring binders and photographs from home, students can create and compile a biography of their families. Writing comes easier and students gain marketable skills of editing, laying out and organizing a "text" that is their own. Simply starting with a poster of student-generated class rules, or an in-class schedule of learning activities can be a group activity with a great deal of debate and joint decision making involved. Pooling the diversity of the class into a peer-edited cookbook, a collection of student autobiographies, or a letter to the local transit authority to request better

bus service to your classroom can provide a rich forum for building a tight classroom community in addition to working on skills needed for the GED. The first step to successful class projects is involving the students in class direction and decision making.

The Teacher's Role

This approach means I had to look at my classroom in a different light. For my students, being outspoken and active in events that affect them is a key to mobility whether they are in the foodstamp office, the laundry mat, or their child's elementary school. If they don't advocate for themselves, their sometimes very marginal lives on public assistance are threatened. When I began teaching, I saw talking, interaction and commotion in the class due to outside issues as a deviance from learning. I felt safe with teacher guided activities that produced quiet, individualized learning. Marshaling their energy and concerns into a quiet classroom where "learning" would begin with open G.E.D. textbooks was often difficult. Now, I capitalize on this energy and information and use it as raw material for student work.

Furthermore, students who once expected straightforward test preparation, but usually dreaded it, find the open, participatory environment more conducive to learning. Students who had difficulty writing half a page on a regular G.E.D. topic were amazed to find themselves writing four or five pages of analysis on their own lives for our project. Math work, which often seemed oppressive, was eagerly tackled for our project because it truly seemed applicable to their lives.

In large part I feel the success of project- based learning activities rests on the creation of a comfortable, risk-free classroom environment. Students must feel they can discuss their lives, beliefs and mistakes

without fear of criticism or judgment. Only then can the instructor locate real issues of importance to build on in class. For the instructor, the challenges lie, not so much in carrying out the actual project, but in being able to effectively assume the role of advisor and guide rather than a dispenser of information with all the answers. Being actively involved in the salient issues of the class and then teasing out what is evocative and meaningful to the students is crucial. Distilling these into a class project, though, usually takes care of itself. Students are experts in their own reality; the biggest challenge is letting them guide you through it.

Why Project-based Leaning?

As an adult education professional development trainer, I travel around the state and have the opportunity to get a perspective on what approaches teachers are having success with in their classrooms. When the subject of project-based learning comes up, I am often asked, "Why?" If teachers are having success gaining G.E.D.'s with traditional instruction, what advantages are to be gained from a more participatory approach in the classroom?

Increased pressures placed on students as a result of welfare reform and a steadily more competitive workplace mean that students need much more than core academic skills to succeed as we move into the twenty-first century. The SCANS (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills) report, developed through the Department of Labor in 1991, designated that future success rests on a foundation of not only basic, academic skills, but the *ability to creatively think and interact in a group setting*. A strong sense of personal responsibility and solid self esteem are a vital basis for this success. Core academic skills should be gained "using cooperative learning opportunities to encourage

teamwork...".[5] Collaborative student projects can better prepare our students for the demands of the workplace.

More recently, The National Institute for Literacy has outlined *Four Purposes* for adult learning in their Equipped for the Future reform initiative. These purposes find natural support and are nurtured in project-based activities. A survey of 1500 learners told researchers that adult learners need:

- Access to information so they can orient themselves in the world;
- Voice to be able to express ideas and opinions with confidence;
- To be able to act independently to solve problems without having to rely on others; and
- A bridge to the future so adult learners can "learn how to learn" to keep up with the rapidly changing world.[6]

Project-based learning provides students with durable learning skills and a broader understanding of their place in the world. The progress gained is not short term, like the G.E.D., but progress that can last a lifetime.

[5] What Work Requires of Schools: A SCANS Report for America 2000. (1991) 23

[6] Stein, Sondra Gayle. Equipped for the Future: A Reform Agenda for Adult Literacy and Learning. (National Institute for Literacy. Washington: 1997) 7

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