7-1-2017

Engaging Secondary Students in Collaborative Action-Oriented Inquiry: Challenges and Opportunities

J. Spencer Clark
Kansas State University, jspencerclark@k-state.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://newprairiepress.org/networks
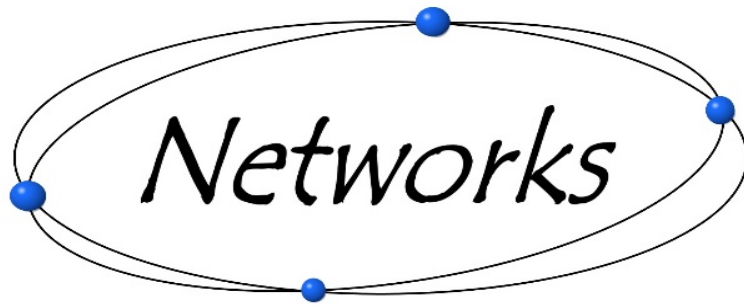
 Part of the Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons

An Online Journal for Teacher Research

Engaging Secondary Students in Collaborative Action-Oriented Inquiry: Challenges and Opportunities

J. Spencer Clark - Kansas State University

Introduction

I recently helped facilitate a collaborative problem-based inquiry project with eighty-three secondary students. The students attended a large high school situated in a medium size town, surrounded by farmland and smaller rural towns. Demographically, nearly half of the students identified as Latina/o, while the slight majority of the students were White. The two groups of students also identified with the two dominant religious communities in the area: Catholic and Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. The students were all seniors in an advanced American Government course.

I was able to work with these students because of their teacher Mr. Radken, whom I met as a student in a graduate course I taught. My course was titled Critical Issues in Education, and the product for the course was a problem-based inquiry project. For his project, Mr. Radken had mentioned that his students from these distinct groups interacted at school, but knew very little about each other's lives outside of school. He believed his students did not interact much outside of school due to both groups' cultural emphasis on family, their distinctive religious communities, and other factors which created a sense that students were from two separate communities. After my course, Mr. Radken demonstrated an interest in getting his students to work collaboratively on projects in his social studies courses to help them learn more about each other's lives outside of school. We discussed the possibility of working together to help students create community focused projects in an effort to promote student interaction outside of the school. Therefore, a primary goal of this project was to have students from these two groups work collaboratively to address community problems.

I frame the project as collaborative action-orientated inquiry because the focus for this group of students was on the process of working collaboratively toward a problem-based inquiry goal, and for the process to be action-oriented, or for the students to learn by doing the process (Mertler, 2016). Mr. Radken and I thought it was equally important for students to understand the power of working collaboratively with multiple and diverse perspectives, while also understanding their ability as a citizen to address problems in

their community. When we started to outline the curriculum, we used the principles associated with youth participatory action research (YPAR) (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009; Cammarota, 2014). These principles include the projects being situated in students' lives, utilizing a collaborative approach, aiming for transformation, and aspiring for empowerment. All the projects were situated in the students' lives and collaborative in their approach, while the principles of transformation and empowerment were achieved to varying degrees in most, if not all, projects.

The goal for each collaborative group (6-10 students) was to develop an action plan to address a community problem they identified as relevant and important to their lives. The collaborative groups developed their projects by following an inquiry model that combined action research, problem-based, and open inquiry models. The students had complete ownership in their projects, which resulted in a high level of engagement. While the projects were completely student driven, from question to action plan, the students required a lot of support from both their teacher and myself.

The students' need for support could be attributed to two key factors: their unfamiliarity with the inquiry process and their limited experience with autonomy in the learning process. A short survey following their projects demonstrated that students had very little experience with inquiry in other courses, and no experience with open inquiry or problem-based inquiry. Similarly, students had little acquaintance with learning experiences in which they had complete autonomy to choose their topic, how to spend their time, and the product they would create for the project. I have found that students' lack of experience with inquiry and autonomy in learning contexts poses distinct challenges, while frustrating, also create distinct opportunities for learning. The purpose of this article is to reflect upon and better articulate these challenges and opportunities for future projects that are in motion or on the horizon.

Challenges = Opportunities for Learning

The primary challenges that I identified and wanted to explore for future projects include students' lack of collaborative skills, lack of experience developing an authentic inquiry question, and understanding that their inquiry has real outcomes and value. First, most students struggled to effectively collaborate with classmates in groups of 6-10 classmates, and most struggled to think collaboratively after identifying a topic and question. It was a strange predicament to have students dually struggle with autonomy and collaboration. I think this dual struggle demonstrates the reliance on teacher-directed curriculum and instruction in U.S. educational contexts. More importantly, this struggle with both autonomy and collaboration created an opportunity for authentic civic learning. Several students noted the civic outcomes of the collaborative inquiry process in their final focus group interviews, with one student saying "I constantly wanted to share or use what I had found because I thought it was important, but like I also had to think about what was best for our group and message."

To facilitate this dilemma in the collaboration process, the teacher and I used some graphic organizers to help students think about potential tasks related to their projects and how to assign responsibilities among group members based. For example, one graphic organizer was particularly helpful because at the center of the page was an oval where

students would enter the task that needed to be done. For example, a task might be to "develop and collect survey on school lunch preference." Identifying and refining the task was a challenging exercise in and of itself. Once the task was developed, the students would put a bubble or box for each member of the group, and in the box describe their contribution, intended outcome, and connection to the final product. The students used this many for data collection tasks, and in their creation of the final product. We also encouraged them to have group members think about their strengths and weaknesses in assigning tasks, and always think of the goals of their project as the priority. I hope to better develop these graphic organizers in the future.

Second, while many groups could identify a problem in their community, they struggled to develop a question around their problem that was open enough, and headed to a "realistic" action plan. This is a common challenge in inquiry projects, and tests a teacher's ability to facilitate inquiry, yet it also creates an opportunity to teach students the value of working through a difficult process. For example, one student reflected on the process and said, "I wanted to give up all the time, we constantly thought we were failing…but after we shared it with community people…I had so much confidence in my ideas…and college seemed less scary." Due to the personalized and social nature of the problems that students identified, we found it helpful to do mini-concept formation activities around the concepts and terms students were using to help them better conceptualize their projects. For example, one group was examining the issue of same-sex marriage laws. However, they struggled to frame it as a question or something they could address and act on in their community. Therefore, I led several concept formation activities on the concept of marriage. First, the students had done enough research they knew the different type of marriages, civil unions, and partnerships that were distinguishable by law, so we created a chart with critical attributes of each signification. This helped students think about key legal distinctions more deeply, but it did not help enough. I continued with leading an activity to define marriage culturally, economically, politically, religiously, and socially. This helped the students decide that they wanted to help their community distinguish between political and religious conceptions of marriage to ultimately argue for the right of same-sex couples to marry. Like in this example, concept formation activities also helped students narrow the scope of their projects, and provide a clearer path for their inquiry. As we thought about examples of the concepts, often students would say, "oh, yeah, that's what I mean."

Lastly, as I mentioned in the previous challenge, students struggled with the real and authentic nature of their inquiry. It was hard for them to completely process the expectation that they would take action on their community problem. Most groups initially developed questions that had no connection to action, or steps to take action. This challenge demonstrates the lack of application, authentic or otherwise, for most learning activities students engage in at school. However, this challenge also creates an opportunity for students to think about implications for their learning outside of school. In my previous research, the addition of an audience (Levine, 2008) has helped create this authentic application to their inquiry. In this specific project, students shared their project at various stages with teachers and administrators, community members and experts, and international peers from the Republic of Macedonia. Each of these audiences offered a different level of familiarity, authenticity, and accountability for their projects. Once

students started sharing their projects with people outside of the school, students quit treating their projects as the artificial or contrived exercises, that typically fill their school days.

Lingering Thoughts

The inquiry process is always messy, and often challenging; however, these students struggled with the process, and my hope was to enable them to be more efficient as they navigated the messy process of inquiry. I think the challenges I have identified will continue to be challenges with K-12 inquiry projects until inquiry-based learning becomes a priority in the curriculum. Some schools in the United States prioritize inquiry-based learning, and many are headed in that direction, while countries like Finland are prioritizing inquiry-based learning in all schools. Until inquiry is prioritized throughout the school system, we should continue to help teachers implement inquiry in K-12 schools and continue to identify and focus on the opportunities for learning that are created by our students' inexperience with inquiry process.

My reflection on this inquiry project has led to three priorities as I am currently developing a new project for secondary students: collaborative skills activities, making task graphic organizers a necessary step in the process, and a conceptual exercise for narrowing students' topics. When I prepare students for deliberation activities, I always have them engage in some warm-up activities. After reflecting on this project, I think I could find some activities to help students prepare to collaborate also, or at the very least engage in some brief cooperative learning activities developed by Kagan or the Johnson brothers. I am currently working on some graphic organizers specifically focused on collaborative task completion. The graphic organizer example, previously mentioned, was effective because it was flexible. Creating a graphic organizer that is flexible enough for a variety of topics is the biggest challenge. Lastly, I would like to have the students break their topics down conceptually as part of the process – even if they have a good question to begin with. This could simply be identifying all of the concepts in their topic or question, or something more in depth, like the Public Issues Model from Harvard University. This model asks students to break down a topic and to think about it in terms of tensions related to Explanational/ Factual Issues, Definitional/Conceptual Issues, Ethical Issues, and Policy Issues. Examining a topic in this manner would also help students get started researching their topic more in depth, and would ultimately contribute to their final project. I typically like to leave the process as open as possible for students, but reflection on this project has indicated that perhaps a little more formalized guidance would be useful for students.

References

Cammarota, J. (2014). The social justice education project. In J. Cammarota & A. Romero (eds.) *Raza Studies: The public option for educational revolution*, *107-121*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press.

Levine, P. (2008), A Public Voice for Youth: the audience problem in digital media and civic education, in W. L. Bennett (Ed.) *Civic Life Online: learning how digital media can engage youth*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Mertler, C. A. (2016). Leading and facilitating educational change through action research learning communities. *Journal of Ethical Educational Leadership*, *3*(3), 1-11.

Rodríguez, L. F., & Brown, T. M. (2009). From voice to agency: Guiding principles for participatory action research with youth. *New Directions for Student Leadership*, *2009(123)*: 19-34.