Introduction

The way we view the primary role of education influences the discourse around schooling[1]. The authentic learning framework stems from social constructivism theory: a belief that learning is collaboratively constructed and that understanding develops from sharing information and challenging others to build knowledge[2]. As we learn, we are shaped by those around us and our learning environment, which in turn influences how we construct our knowledge[3]. The authentic learning approach fosters a learning environment that supports students in achieving their educational goals and becoming engaged citizens, professionals, and dreamers.

The Authentic Learning Framework

As we explore the idea of authentic learning practices, the research offers a view of authenticity not as a single idea but instead as a collection of components. These components provide students with varied opportunities to connect with the content in personally meaningful and relevant ways to ensure retention and application of knowledge across contexts. Research has shown that teachers can emphasize learning as meaningful when it is student-centered, collaborative, contextual, and integrated with community and society[4]. These types of learning experiences increase positive emotions around learning, garner higher perceptions of relevance and long-term understanding, and activate student engagement in learning as well as an intrinsic motivation to learn[5]. Authentic practices not only help teachers to more fully engage students, but also allow students to gravitate toward learning that resonates with them.

Authentic learning practices center on the following components:

1. Student-centered learning. We often use the term "student-centered learning" to describe a shift in teaching focus from the teacher to the student. This idea can include aspects of student agency[6], scaffolded learning environments[7], and the cultural nature of learning[8]. Student-centered learning emphasizes the student's role in constructing their own knowledge. These types of guided learning opportunities help students make purposeful learning decisions that connect to their existing cultures, experiences, and understandings[9]. A student-centered learning environment allows teachers to serve as facilitators throughout the process, supporting students as they become independent learners[10].

2. Construction of knowledge. Construction of knowledge forms the foundation of constructivist theory, building on the idea that there is no knowledge independent of the meaning that we construct as learners[11]. How we construct knowledge is grounded in the work of Piaget, but these ideas have also expanded through recent studies in cognitive psychology, brain research, and human development, which have shown how complex interactions between learners and their environments result in structural changes to the brain's neural networks[12]. These neural networks make up the long-term memory of individuals and are continuously extended and reshaped as new information is received from the environment[13]. Our prior experiences are shaped by educational, social, and cultural experiences both in and out of the classroom[14].

3. Inquiry-based learning. Inquiry-based learning is an active process that begins with and is guided by relevant questions[15]. Teachers can facilitate the inquiry process by helping students to ask good questions, find relevant information, and think through their conclusions, inferences, and solutions[16]. As students work to answer questions through research, analysis, and collaborative discourse, they synthesize and make sense of information and ideas that enable them to deepen their knowledge and share their new understanding with others. Through a focus on inquiry, we allow a student's own curiosity to drive how they construct their knowledge.

4. Real-world connections. Connecting learning to the real world helps students see how their learning might be applicable in the future, while also motivating them to attempt to apply their learning in meaningful ways[17]. These real-world connections can help students develop aspirations about what they want to do after school, since they are positioned to imagine themselves trying different future paths as they learn[18]. When teachers deliberately integrate the school setting with the real world, students can more easily transfer skills upon entering the workforce[19].

With each of these components building on one another, authentic teaching and learning practices emphasize the meaningful aspects of learning. These components of authenticity demonstrate a clear connection between learning and the benefits achieved when that learning has clear value beyond the classroom. By incorporating the components of authenticity, teachers can position themselves to facilitate learning experiences that students will recognize as both intrinsically meaningful and also meaningful for how they interact with their world.

Conclusion

Authentic learning supports educators in developing student-centered learning experiences grounded in a scaffolded process where students build on their identities, cultural backgrounds, and existing knowledge through inquiry and discourse to deepen their understanding and enrich their sense of purpose in the world. Educators are authentic in their practice by being true to the content, the learning process, and the science that supports how people learn. Students develop a connectedness to their learning through their personal histories, aspirations, and cultures. At its heart, authenticity infuses learning with purpose and meaning so that students develop the skills necessary to fully engage with the world around them.

References

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