



AUTHENTICITY: THEORY

K20 IDEALS

Introduction

The way we view the primary role of education influences the discourse around schooling¹. 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 knowledge². As we learn, we are shaped by those around us and our learning environment, which in turn influences how we construct our knowledge³. 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 society⁴. 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 learn⁵. 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 agency⁶, scaffolded learning environments⁷, and the cultural nature of learning⁸. 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 understandings⁹. A student-centered learning environment allows teachers to serve as facilitators throughout the process, supporting students as they become independent learners¹⁰.

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 learners¹¹. 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 networks¹².

These neural networks make up the long-term memory of individuals and are continuously extended and reshaped as new information is received from the environment¹³. Our prior experiences are shaped by educational, social, and cultural experiences both in and out of the classroom¹⁴.

3. Inquiry-based learning. Inquiry-based learning is an active process that begins with and is guided by relevant questions¹⁵. Teachers can facilitate the inquiry process by helping students to ask good questions, find relevant information, and think through their conclusions, inferences, and solutions¹⁶. 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 ways¹⁷. 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 learn¹⁸. When teachers deliberately integrate the school setting with the real world, students can more easily transfer skills upon entering the workforce¹⁹.

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

¹Labaree, 1997

²Vygotsky, 1978

³Darling-Hammond et al., 2021; Osher et al., 2020

⁴Anderson, 1983; Atkinson & Schiffrin, 1977; Ausubel, 2000; Bransford et al., 2000; Dewey, 1966; Piaget, 1972

⁵Nachtigall et al., 2022; Parsons et al., 2021; Jeter et al., 2019; Kuhlthau et al., 2015

⁶Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019; Moses et al., 2020; Reeve & Shin, 2020

⁷De Backer et al., 2016; Mariage et al., 2019; Schwartz et al., 2021

⁸Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Hammond, 2015; Kelly et al., 2021; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2018

⁹Colter & Ulatowsky, 2017

¹⁰Lee & Hannafin, 2016; Reeve & Shin, 2020

¹¹Fox, 2001; Piaget, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978

¹²Liu et al., 2017; NASEM, 2018

¹³Liu et al., 2017

¹⁴Liu et al., 2017; NASEM, 2018

¹⁵Chatterjee et al., 2009; Kuhlthau et al., 2015

¹⁶Kranzfelder et al., 2019; Ligozat et al., 2017

¹⁷Darling-Hammond et al., 2021

¹⁸Singer et al., 2020; Beier et al., 2018; Koomen et al., 2018

¹⁹Osher et al., 2020

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