



Components of Authenticity: REAL-WORLD CONNECTIONS *K20 IDEALS*

Teachers can help students to be more engaged in the classroom by guiding them to make real-world connections. Helping students connect new information to their own experiences and find personal significance in their learning produces more authentic and effective learning experiences. When learning is connected to the real world, students can see how their learning might be applicable in the future and are motivated to apply their knowledge in meaningful ways in the present¹. Authentic practices create a school setting that is integrated with the real world, which makes it easier for learners to transfer skills when they enter the workforce². As needs change in society and in the world of work, research continues to shape how we define and implement authentic learning. Through the use of authentic tasks, tools, and audiences and the integration of cultural connections, teachers can make learning more engaging and relevant to their students.

Authentic Tasks

For a learning task to be authentic, projects and problems should contain a level of realism to the professional world that is developmentally appropriate for the learners³. The thinking processes involved in a learning activity affect its perceived relevance to the real world. For example, even if a science experiment in class looks nothing like it would in the real world, the questions that students generate to make observations about what is going on should simulate real scientific thinking. Real-world relevance is the extent to which lessons are embedded in meaningful contexts, are connected to real-world issues, or ask students to create a product with significance in its own right. Another important aspect of authentic activity design is that assessment of learning should be embedded into the learning task rather than being separate⁴. Authentic formative assessment tasks are designed to engage students realistically within the activity, which promotes deeper learning.

Authentic Tools

One way that real-world connections in learning drive student motivation is through providing opportunities for students to imagine themselves trying different future paths, which helps them develop aspirations about what they would like to do after completing school⁵. When students use the tools of the professional world for their learning (e.g., software, lab equipment, databases, mathematical formulas, art supplies, or primary information sources), a level of realism is embedded into the learning that comes from interaction with those tools. As a result, their motivation to learn increases⁶. Even if the learning task isn't "realistic" to the professional world, students who get to practice with tools they might use in a profession will feel as though they are trying out the profession while gaining applicable skills. This creates a sense of connection and relevance.

Authentic Audiences

When students perceive that what they are learning holds value to a real audience—especially if it holds value within the cultures or communities they are part of—this connection will increase the depth of their motivation and engagement in learning⁷. Giving students the opportunity to show their learning by creating products significant to an audience outside the school engages them in higher-order thinking and complex problem-solving skills. Simultaneously, this connection leverages cognitive-social learning factors



that promote student motivation⁸. When students work together to solve open-ended problems and create products, they are not only practicing social learning tasks that hold value in the world of work, but also beginning to develop their identities as future professionals⁹. With this in mind, building a classroom and school community of collaboration, peer support, and shared learning can be a way to generate authentic learning and real-world significance.

Cultural and Community Connections

Integrating students' cultural frameworks (customs, family traditions, symbols, myths, etc.) into the design of learning experiences leverages a deep well of prior knowledge, motivation, and relevance. When there is a discrepancy between students' home cultures and the school culture, students are at an academic disadvantage¹⁰. Building real-world connections that are culturally relevant to students into the learning experience is one way to counter this effect¹¹.

Teachers can leverage culture and community toward building real-world connections by providing choices that enable students to use cultural strengths to demonstrate their learning¹². These choices might relate to students' audiences, the products they generate, or the tools they use.

Conclusion

Real-world connections establish the relevance of a learning experience for students by weaving their personal, community, and cultural backgrounds into the lesson. Through encouraging students to create products that serve a real audience and providing students with authentic, developmentally appropriate tasks and tools that mirror the world of work, teachers can create more engaging, effective learning experiences. Real-world connections also promote student-centered learning and agency because relevance can be tied to what students find interesting and compatible with their values, their sense of who they are, and where they want to be in the world¹³.

References

- ¹Darling-Hammond et al., 2021
- ²Osher et al., 2020
- ³Burgin, 2020; Kruse et al., 2021; Roach et al., 2018
- ⁴Darling-Aduana, 2021; Nachtigall et al., 2022
- ⁵Beier et al., 2018; Koomen et al., 2018; Singer et al., 2020
- ⁶Burgin, 2020; Nachtigall et al., 2022
- ⁷Burgin, 2020; Cantor et al., 2019; Darling-Hammond et al., 2021
- ⁸Bandura, 1989; Burgin, 2020; Darling-Aduana, 2021; Schrum et al., 2021; Tang, 2017; Villarroel et al., 2018
- ⁹Beier et al., 2018; Koomen et al., 2018; Ornellas et al., 2019; Schrum et al., 2021; Singer et al., 2020
- ¹⁰Bonner et al., 2018; Wah & Nasri, 2019
- ¹¹Byrd, 2016; Dee & Penner, 2017; Tanase, 2022
- ¹²Bonner et al., 2018; Tanase, 2022
- ¹³Petterson et al., 2022

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