

How to Raise ¥5,059,890 for Charity and Find the Perfect Husband: The Benefits of Student-Driven Language Learning Projects

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“A teacher’s responsibility is not to teach the content. A teacher’s responsibility is to teach the students and make sure that all students learn new content every day.”

From “Teaching Gifted Kids in the Regular Classroom”, by Susan Winebrenner

Introduction & Background

Since ancient times, the function of education and the ways in which teachers have been expected to guide their students have continually evolved to serve the varied needs of populations throughout the world, as individuals and societies have changed with the times.

Not long after the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, an American educational reformer named Horace Mann began working to make formal education accessible to the public with support from the government. Up to this time, most formal education had been limited to the elite and/or religious institutions. (Fraser, 1999; Garrison, 2009). Based on Mann’s pedagogy, more and more schools and classrooms throughout the industrialized world began using “teacher-lecture → student-memorization → test-based” instruction, in an effort to produce as many educated, work-ready students as quickly and efficiently as possible. (Gatto, 2005; Garrison, 2009)

Unfortunately, such classrooms tended to show little regard for students’ individual needs or talents and thereby often proved to be counter-productive for many students and teachers. Although

public education had been designed to give equal access to learning and better life opportunities to all, it continued to fail to meet the needs of many. (Garrison, 2009)

By the early 20th century, some concerned educators began to worry about the effectiveness of the “teach to the masses” model. One of these educators was Maria Montessori, who worked with poor children in the slums of Italy during the early 20th century. (Montessori, 1912) Another was Sylvia Ashton-Warner, who taught Maori children in New Zealand during the same time period. (Ashton-Warner, 1963) Both Montessori and Ashton-Warner challenged administrators to allow teachers more freedom to focus on meeting more students’ individual needs.

Among educational practices which Montessori and Ashton-Warner embraced, were those of student-generated and project-based learning. Both Montessori and Ashton-Warner believed that these were very effective ways to prepare students to become creative, deep thinking, productive adults.

Now, in the 21st century, as students and teachers are facing new challenges in education, which have come with changes from the Industrial Age to

the Information Age, more and more teachers and institutions are again recognizing the importance of including individualized and project-based learning in their curriculums.

Current Trends in Individualized, Project-Based Instruction

Teacher and author Susan Winebrenner writes, “The concept of teaching all students at their own challenge level is one with which most teachers agree in principle. Yet in today’s heterogeneous classrooms, large class sizes and increasing ranges of ability create significant stresses for teachers who must find ways to reach and teach all of their students.” (Winebrenner, 2001) Winebrenner advocates the use of *Goal-Setting Logs* and *Educational Compactors*, in which students are given opportunities to focus on the parts of the curriculum, which they, as individuals, need to master, while ignoring those which they have already mastered. Students, (including those seen as “gifted” and/or “special needs” students) are expected to work on self-initiated learning projects, which will both engage them and help them toward mastery. (Winebrenner, 2001)

Educator and author, Dale Parnell also advocates project-based learning in the classroom. He identifies, expands on, and helps show teachers how to work with *Seven Principles That Can Transform The Classroom*. These include *Purpose, Building, Application, Problem Solving, Teamwork, Discovery, & Connection*. (Parnell, 1995)

Paul Shultz, author of “*How Do We Prepare Our Children for What’s Next?*” states, “When most of us were deciding what to major in at college, the word *Google* was not a verb. It wasn’t anywhere close to being conceived at all. Neither was *Wikipedia* or the *iPhone* or *YouTube*. We made decisions about our future employment based on what we knew existed at the time...Sixty-five percent of today’s grade-school kids may end up doing work that hasn’t been invented yet... We’re 15 years into something so paradigm - changing that we have not yet adjusted our institutions of learning, work, social life, and economic life to account for the massive change.” (Shultz, 2011) In order to adjust, Shultz suggests, among other things, that students be responsible for creating projects as a way of personalizing and deepening their learning within different educational disciplines.

While Winebrenner, Parnell, and Shultz are all individual teachers who have found success in the use of individual student projects as ways for students to master their own learning, entire educational programs have also advocated the use of such projects. The increasingly popular, “inquiry-based” *International Baccalaureate (IB)* is an example. Students in the *Primary Years* (elementary school) *Program* are given many opportunities to create individual and group projects in an effort to individualize learning and become prepared for the 10th grade *Personal Project*, which they present at the end of the *Middle Years Program*, when they are 15-16 years old.

For the *Personal Project*, students research any topic of their choice in depth. They then present their project (which reflects this research) to the school community at the end of the school year. While this is a very challenging assignment for a lot of the students, many feel a huge sense of pride in the amazing projects, which they have been given the opportunity to produce. The learning, which takes place throughout the *process* of creating these projects, is considered every bit as important as the *product* itself. *Personal Projects* which students present are as varied as the students themselves, and almost always impressive.

As a community member, parent, and mentor for 10th graders involved in these projects at Poudre High School, (a public *IB* high school in Fort Collins Colorado), I have been able to see the value of the *IB* projects from different perspectives, and I have always appreciated how much they can contribute to students' learning—including those students who are learning English as a second language.

Real-life Inspired Projects at Kaisei

Kobe Kaisei Women's College is fortunate to be able to offer many small foreign language classes, which allow for a lot of personal interaction among class members and their foreign instructors. However, there are times when classes might have some students with very little confidence or ability to communicate in English, while others in the same class are very communicative with written and/or spoken English. Whether such a class

consists of six or thirty-seven students, teachers usually hope to find ways in which to challenge and motivate all students in the class to work to their highest potential.

Two sections of an *English for Tourism* class, which I taught last year, were good examples of such varied classes. One section of this class had thirty-seven students ranging from almost no English to high-intermediate level. The other section had four students, all who depended far too much on their Japanese in order to attempt even the simplest of exercises. How was I going to fairly and successfully help all of my students learn the English they needed from this class by the end of the semester?

We started out using a lot of TPRS activities, which worked up to a point, but soon students became restless. Unfortunately, the textbook for the class was a poor match for the students. I could see that I would need to change the way I was teaching this class in order to keep more students interested and learning. Fortunately, just at the right time, I received an e-mail, which inspired me to change my teaching approach.

A former Thai student, whom I had taught at Colorado State University, sent an e-mail saying she hoped to visit a former classmate and me in Japan during the spring. My student, Mint, asked for help planning her trip. I thought, "In America, professors frequently ask their students for help in similar situations. I'll ask my Tourism/ Hospitality students for help with this."

I shared the e-mail with my students as a chance for a “real-life” application for the English skills they might well need in their futures. Students came up with questions to ask Mint for more details to help plan the trip.

With the help of their iPhones to access the internet, groups of 3-4 students researched travel information to fit Mint’s budget, interests, time frames, etc. From this information, they created detailed 10-day “tour of Japan” itineraries, complete with accommodation, transportation, meal, and other information that would be useful to Mint and her travel companions.

As Mint’s needs changed, students made necessary changes to their travel plans. I had promised them that Mint would choose her favorite plan from the choices that each group presented; the group which provided this plan would gain bonus points. Unfortunately, Mint had trouble choosing, so I decided to give all groups bonus points. Students loved this.

After finishing Mint’s travel plans, I had students make a week-long travel plan for any international destination of their choice. This time, students worked individually, rather than in groups. Again, students stayed engaged and enthusiastic, as they created their own international travel plans. By the time the class ended, students seemed to feel that everybody had learned important English skills while also learning new information related to their major.

In a completely different kind of class, made up of *English for Careers* majors, I was challenged again by lack of

motivation by some students who were struggling to understand their reading book, which was far above their English level. I had chosen Greg Mortenson’s young-adult version of *Three Cups of Tea* to be the text for the 4th year students’ Academic Reading class. I knew the book would be difficult for some students, but I had confidence that most would appreciate the challenge of reading a full-length book about events that were taking place in the real world around them.

The high-level English learners in the class quickly took to the challenge, but the low-level learners quickly became discouraged. By the time we reached Chapter 8, I realized that all of our in-class reading, discussion, and answering of comprehension questions had really done very little to help the low the students actually understand some of the most important information from the book. Again, I found myself asking, “How can I help every student have a meaningful learning experience from this class?”

I decided to put the students into small groups and have each group create a “picture book version” of their assigned chapters. Suddenly, all students became excited and willing to work harder than they had during the previous weeks. Not only did this exercise help them make clearer meaning from their assigned chapters, but it also helped them better understand the chapters which other groups had been assigned to summarize and illustrate.

For the remaining 16 chapters of the book, small groups worked from 1-2

page summaries of each chapter to further summarize and illustrate their assigned chapters for their class-mates. As soon as all students could see that they were “all in this together”, they became more and more interested in working on their chosen chapters, to help each other understand the book. At the end of the class, most “lower level” students said that they had initially been very confused by the book, but once students started summarizing and illustrating individual chapters to share with their classmates, they enjoyed and learned a lot in the class.

Through reading, summarizing, illustrating, and discussing *Three Cups of Tea*, students learned how Greg Mortenson’s quest to “bring peace to the world one school at a time” (Mortenson, 2007) had inspired people of all ages all over the world to work to meet this challenge. We discussed the efforts of Fort Collins, Colorado based “Sustainable Schools International” to increase donations for their schools in Cambodia with a \$25,000 (=¥5,059,890) matching grant drive, which was taking place at the same time that we were reading the book. We also brainstormed for ways that Kaisei students might use ideas from *Three Cups of Tea* to help earthquake/tsunami victims who had suffered from the March 2011 disaster in northeastern Japan.

Many students became increasingly interested in trying to find ways to help people in our world who had suffered in different ways. A surprising number of students were also intrigued by the idea that Greg Mortenson met his wife at a

school fundraising dinner and married her 6 days later. I had never imagined how powerful this part of the book would be for the students, but it definitely added to their interest in finding out what would happen next in the story - as well as figuring out how to help better the world around us.

Because of the success of the above project-driven classes, I have decided that during the upcoming semester I will try to create individual project bases from which to approach many more classes. I envision students in my multi-level oral communication and reading classes all working on assignments which will be assigned to the entire class, while also doing independent research projects related to any subjects which individual students wish to investigate on their own. I expect that students in my freshman writing class will undertake projects such as writing and illustrating a bilingual children’s picture book (which one student has indicated an interest in creating and publishing) investigating and writing about England, doing research on theater and musicals, etc. Again, the possibilities are as endless as the students’ interests.

I plan to provide the necessary language support to meet course requirements, of course, but I will spend a lot less time “teaching to the class” and a lot more time teaching to individuals. I hope to help more of my students learn in much the same way that Maria Montessori helped her students by “following the child”; in the way that Sylvia Ashton Warner helped her students create their own class materials

from their personal experiences; or in the way that IB students learn by researching, creating, and sharing their own projects to the bigger community.

I hope that such classes will give students the confidence and ability to do even bigger projects as they continue to grow as students and people. In the same way that Maria Montessori taught young children to learn independently so that by their early teens they could handle bigger projects like running a farm or small business, I hope to guide Kaisei students to similar projects by creating a class environment which allows them to explore their world using English, rather than simply learning the English that their textbooks provide.

Ideally, when students finish their studies at our college, they will feel prepared to face, with self-assurance, any careers which may interest them in the future—whether or not we can predict what those careers may be now. I believe that student generated projects, at all levels, can not but help our students become more engaged as learners at our college and better prepared to live their lives as happy, productive adults.

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