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“When the Principal Sneezes” - Middle Level leadership

by Dennis J. Duquette & Robert C. Spear, Ed.D

“When the principal sneezes, the whole school catches a cold. This is neither good nor bad; it is just the truth. Our impact is significant; our focus becomes the school focus. If we have great credibility and good relationships, people work to please us. If we lack credibility, people work against us. Once we make it clear what we want, supporters will work for it and opponents will drag their feet or head the other way. The relationships we establish will determine how many are in each camp. We must keep our attention on the issues that matter, not divert our effort and energy to trivial annoyances.”(Todd Whittaker – What Great Leaders do Differently)

George Washington was not always a great tactician, but all historians agree...he was a great general. Why? His soldiers loved and respected him. He lived with them. When they were cold, he shivered with them. When there was not enough food to go around, he went without. He knew that to win the revolution he must first win the hearts of his soldiers. His self-sacrifice and concern for them as human beings made Washington one of the greatest generals in history.

Leadership is a complicated topic, because there are probably as many definitions of leadership as there are leaders in the world. That’s because a leader is a person with many roles... executive officer, superintendent, principal, teacher, coach, parent, spouse, etc. I have come to believe that great leadership is a special quality in people and it is people that want to make a positive difference in the lives of others who become successful leaders. Simply said, leaders care about others, they walk the talk, they keep things simple, they keep hope alive, they take responsibility and they make a difference whenever and wherever they can. George Washington did just that! His methods were simple, he kept it simple, he treated people with respect and made people feel valued and excited about what they were doing.

As a middle school principal, this is all part of my leadership philosophy and it works! Once you have created a positive atmosphere in your school and established clear expectations for staff, students, parents, and the community, follow these consistently, you will have established an atmosphere that is conducive to people wanting to succeed – which includes students wanting to learn. Teachers, students and parents yearn for a school atmosphere where their kids want to go to school and where teachers feel supported, enriched and parents are welcome. These concepts are nothing new, but they are concepts that have been proven to work for thousands of years.

Presently, our middle schools are under tremendous pressure to perform better on standardized tests whether they are local, state or federally mandated tests. We have to better prepare our teachers on what successful middle level teaching is all about and then excite our students with “best practices” that engage all students in wanting to learn. We do this by emphasizing the mission, vision, and core values of our school in such a way as to encourage our school community to accept and implement the philosophies and concepts associated with best practices. These are based on “solid” research and information from reports, professional articles, books or personal experience. “Best practice” is anything that engages and motivates students while, at the same time, encourages deeper thinking skills. The stories I shared above simply set the tone and the atmosphere for a successful classroom or school climate. “Best practices” will give you the know-how and experience to make more positive and informed decisions regarding teaching and learning.

“Best Practices” in middle schools are also about creating interdisciplinary units between and across all subjects. Examples are small group activities that are inquiry based, collaborative projects and tasks between pairs or groups, using literature circles to engage more diverse styles of learning, creating an experience that is authentic, such as taking students to a local food pantry to make the

connection between a school garden and the community needs, or middle school teachers taking their classes to a woodlot or pond to better connect their classroom learning with reality.

Staff meetings and professional development is an opportune time to teach “best practices” by having staff learn new things, brainstorm new ideas, learn about new ways that are proven to increase student reading, writing, and math success or how to better engage at-risk students. Using portfolios gives student’s opportunities to set goals, reflect on their growth and produce evidence of growth. If you have never sat in on student-led conferences, you are missing something...when done correctly, they are incredible.

Best Practices is about “thinking out of the box” using your creativity and the creativity of others to make learning more exciting and valuable for both the teacher and student. Just as a great teacher creates magic and excitement in a classroom, we as leaders need to create the same type of excitement at staff meetings, professional development workshops, etc.

Teaching in a middle school is the chance to do what few people ever get the opportunity to do - change the lives of others for ever. It takes a unique person to teach this age group and when armed with the right, positive attitude and a strong background in middle level teaching, combined with the latest in proven “best practice” skills, a teacher/leader can change the world. The kids are ready and waiting to be led down the path of discovery and all we have to do is excite them. Inspire the kids to have a purpose and a goal and they will surprise you beyond belief.

A great teacher and a great leader can make any new program or new idea work. It is a matter of creating the environment where everyone cares about each other. In Steven Covey’s book “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective people” he speaks about being “proactive” and explains that proactive people carry their own weather with them – whether it rains or shines makes no difference to them. Their honor is greater than their moods. .

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Improving Student Engagement and Achievement:

Making “Daily Oral Language” Grammar Lessons Relevant to Students’ Lives

By Lori Young, Andrea J. Stairs, Ph.D., and Susan L. Groenke, Ph.D.

Abstract

This collaborative action research study examined whether student engagement and achievement could be increased with an intervention using popular music in “Daily Oral Language” grammar mini-lessons. Participants included 15 seventh-grade students in an urban language arts classroom in the southeastern United States. Data were analyzed from pre- and post-intervention student questionnaires and weekly quiz scores. Findings indicate significantly improved levels of student engagement and achievement when compared to pre-intervention data.

Introduction

Can grammar instruction be fun? Should it be? Or are grammar lessons simply a necessary foundational aspect of education which most students wish they could avoid? Whatever the answer, grammar instruction is a reality in the life of the first author, a seventh-grade language arts teacher. In her classroom, and in classrooms around the nation, students spend time learning grammar rules through “Daily Oral Language” (DOL) mini-lessons, in this case, as a result of a local mandate for this type of grammar instruction. Typically, DOL is a 10 minute class opener that involves students editing two sentences shown on the board or the overhead. The sentences have intentional grammatical errors, anywhere from two to five in each sentence. The students are told how many errors the sentences contain and they are to write the sentences and correct the errors. After approximately four to five minutes to complete this task, the class works together to identify the necessary corrections. All students are expected to follow along; making changes as the class works together is acceptable and common. The sentences are not collected, but instead are saved to study for the weekly quiz. Quizzes consist of two sentences which are to be corrected by the students.

For the first author teaching 50 minute class periods, the daily class time spent on DOL translates into approximately one day per week being devoted to this instructional task. With such a high importance placed upon this aspect of students’ learning, it is critical that teachers use effective teaching strategies to make the most of this opportunity. However, one concern about DOL grammar instruction is lack of student engagement with lessons, which often translates into lower student achievement. In the seventh-grade classroom where this collaborative action research study was conducted between school and university partners, the teacher frequently observed students staring blankly off into space, writing notes to friends, and generally lacking enthusiasm for DOL. Concern for these students, as well as a constant search for new and effective teaching strategies, led to an exploration of alternative approaches to DOL. Research on grammar instruction and reflection on the matter evolved into the following research question: Can student engagement and achievement be increased with a Daily Oral Language intervention using popular music? Music seemed a logical choice for content matter since most middle school students are very interested in popular music. Our hope was to discover new ways to make DOL lessons more relevant and interesting to the students, and through the process, perhaps provide other language arts instructors with an effective teaching strategy for engaging students with grammar.

Grammar instruction looked quite different for the five week intervention of this action research study. Instead of decontextualized sentences prepared by a major educational publishing company, the classroom teacher created DOL lessons using popular music artists as suggested by the students (Appendix A). A song performed by the musician of the day was also played for the students during the time they were to write and correct the sentences. Though the class opening *procedure* remained consistent, the *content* was very different as it connected with students’ interests. The effect of this intervention is discussed further in this paper, but first we report on the relevant research literature that informed this study.

Literature Review

This review of the literature relevant to the topic of effective and engaging grammar instruction was conducted primarily through the ERIC and Education Full Text online databases, although information was also reviewed from the National Council of Teachers of English book *Teaching Grammar in Context* (Weaver, 1996). It is clear in looking across the literature that literacy teachers and researchers have been exploring ways to improve grammar instruction for decades.

Weaver (1996) traces the history of the grammar debate back to its roots, and the problem seems to stem from the fact that grammatical standards, unlike language itself, tend to become inflexible doctrines. In spite of the fact that theories of education and associated pedagogies for grammar instruction are constantly evolving, “In our schools, the Alexandrian tradition has dominated the study of grammar for more than two thousand years” (p. 3). Even in ancient Rome, scholars such as the orator and rhetorician Quintilian recognized that although “one major concern of the grammarian should be rules for correctness (institutes, I.v.1.)....standards for usage should be based upon the current usage of the educated, not upon ancient authority that has ceased to govern the speech of learned individuals (I.vi.43-45)” (p. 3). Quintilian’s problem lives on today as a collection of traditionalists on one side of the issue strive to maintain a system of grammatical drill and detached error-based pedagogy while on the opposite side of the issue, many educational theorists, practitioners, and researchers maintain the idea that “there is little pragmatic justification for systematically teaching a descriptive or explanatory (prescriptive) grammar of the language, whether that grammar be traditional, structural, transformational, or any other kind” (p. 39).

The debate in English education became even more intense during the 1970s and 1980s when “a body of research began to show the cracks in traditional grammar instruction” (Asselin, 2002, p. 52). Although many teachers still firmly believed that students must be drilled on grammar rules and taught sentence structure through worksheets that provide constant practice of the principles of proper grammar, many other educators began to promote the idea that it is essential to provide students with opportunities to engage in relevant, context-based learning experiences. The main findings of numerous studies indicated that effective grammar instruction must be contextualized, “giving students the tools they can use to produce or understand texts that are relevant to them” (Asselin, 2002, p. 52).

Feng and Powers (2005) conducted a collaborative research project involving a fifth-grade language arts teacher and university faculty in order to analyze the effectiveness of error-based grammar instruction in a context-based format according to positive short-term and long-term improvements in students’ writing. According to the researchers, “This study found that for this particular group of students, on almost all the grammatical items, accuracy can be improved through mini-lessons that target errors identified in student writing in both short and long-term measurements” (p. 67). While this study clearly supports the idea that “error-based instruction is an effective approach to grammar teaching” (p. 67), it also supports the idea that grammar instruction is effective when it is placed into a relevant context. These students were not doing practice drills or providing worksheet answers; they were correcting their own work.

Hutchinson et al. (2002) also conducted research projects in which various teachers employed context-based grammar instruction along with a process writing approach, and the results of their projects further supported the idea that isolated grammar drills are not the most effective means of ensuring retention of the principles of grammar. As Hutchinson et al. state, “Grammar instruction needs to be brought out of the isolated chamber of daily oral language, worksheets, and products completed in one sitting. It needs to be connected to the children’s personal lives and the literature they read” (p. 40).

In spite of these research findings, however, the reality for some middle school language arts instructors is that some type of grammar drill strategy is mandated as a part of the daily lesson plan. Administrators, members of school boards, and parents expect students to be taught grammar in a manner similar to what they experienced as students. Under these circumstances, idealism and realism must be integrated, and the key to effective grammar instruction would seem to lie within student engagement and the incorporation of content material and activities in which the students are naturally interested.

Many twenty-first century educators are exploring new ways in which to improve student engagement with grammar instruction, a content area which has often been associated with negative student perceptions. Cambourne (1995), a researcher whose educationally relevant theory of learning came from the study of language acquisition in toddlers, states that learning requires immersion, demonstration, engagement, expectations, responsibility, approximations, employment, and response, and among these components, his studies involving teachers as co-researchers indicate that “engagement (is) the key” (p. 186). One method of engaging students in any type of instruction is to get them up and moving, and Van Zile (2003) found this to be a very effective strategy in her language arts classroom. Her grammar lessons include “performing noun skits” and a strategy of “Velcro Centers” in which students were able to manipulate grammar conventions in sentences by placing laminated punctuation “pieces” onto laminated sentence templates. Van Zile questioned her students about their learning, and “every one of the students agrees they learned more from the movement activities than from worksheets” (p. 33).

Breznek and Scott (2003) also tried an alternative approach to grammar instruction, and her methodology of small-group peer teaching of grammar concepts was a classroom success. Each group was responsible for teaching a concept to the entire class, and Breznek and Scott found that “students learn best what they teach to someone else” and “students will listen to another student more easily than they will listen to a teacher lecture” (p. 59). Still another new approach to grammar instruction is to incorporate multiliteracies, such as song lyrics, magazine articles, and newspaper stories and headlines. Although many educators have expressed concern about using these formats, including the important idea that “we need to make sure that students can communicate, speaking and writing in complete intelligent sentences” (Malette, et al. 2005, p. 7), many instructors have experienced positive results when incorporating these strategies. Kane (1996), a supervisor of student teachers, helped one student teacher engage her students by teaching grammar through articles that were related to the O.J. Simpson trial. Using newspaper quotes such as “If it doesn’t fit, you must acquit” (Johnnie Cochran), Kane engaged her students with rhetoric, rhyme, and effective word choice in everyday print sources, and she felt that the students had gained valuable skills: “What they discover is that grammar is not just something for students to learn for tests, but rather a tool that helps writers convey various shades of meaning or to evoke desired responses from readers” (p. 89). And isn’t this, after all, our ultimate goal in teaching grammar instruction: to help our students become capable writers who can decode real-life texts and write in a manner that is effective for their own purposes in their own lives? If so, we are required to engage our students with interesting grammar lessons that will help them retain their new knowledge of the principles of grammar.

Research Methodology

In this section, we introduce the study’s setting and participants and provide a description of the procedures used to collect and analyze data.

Setting

The collaborative action research study reported in this paper was conducted in a seventh-grade language arts classroom in an urban middle school in the southeastern United States. At the time of this study, the student population of this school was approximately 1200 students, grades six through eight, with approximately 59% of students identified as low-income. The ethnic breakdown

of the student body was 78% Caucasian, 19% African-American, 2.5% Hispanic, and less than .5% of students categorized as Native American or Asian. The school had previously experienced difficulties meeting the federal guidelines for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP); however, due to an overall focused effort towards improving student achievement, the test scores for the 2005-2006 school year demonstrated a high level of academic proficiency. The “Value-Added” scores for the overall sixth-grade student body in the previous 2005-2006 school year resulted in the school receiving an “A” grade for the categories of Language Arts/Reading and Social Studies and a “B” grade for the categories of Math and Science. It is this class, last year’s sixth-grade and the current year’s seventh-grade student body, from which the participants in this research study were chosen.

Participants

Sixteen students participated at the outset of the study; however, one student left the school before the study was complete. Of the remaining 15 students, five were African-American and ten were Caucasian. For language arts, the students were grouped according to ability levels as determined by student performance on state standardized tests. This particular class was composed of an even mix of students who performed at grade level and below grade level. Some of the students’ performances were affected by excessive absences, and within this category, disciplinary issues often affected attendance. None of the students had an Individualized Education Plan, but the characteristics of many of the students’ behaviors were similar to those of students who receive special education for emotional problems or disturbances.

The class period during which the study was conducted was the students’ last class in their daily schedule. They attended seven 50 minute periods of instruction, with a 25 minute lunch during fourth period. Participants in this study arrived for seventh period language arts after attending physical education, and they were typically both energized and exhausted. Many had difficulty staying focused during seventh period, and they had a tendency to struggle more with the concepts of grammar than the students in my other classes. This class was selected for inquiry because of the performance and behavior factors listed above and the belief that these students might benefit the most from an intervention strategy designed to increase student engagement. Prior to initiating an intervention strategy, many of the students in this class often seemed disengaged, and as a group they performed poorly on Daily Oral Language quizzes.

Data Collection and Procedures

The students’ parents were informed that the class had been chosen to participate in a study which was to be conducted for the purpose of assessing and improving student engagement and achievement with Daily Oral Language lessons. A notification letter explained the essence and overview of the study and offered contact information for any parent who wanted to discuss their child’s participation or object to the inclusion of anonymous score reporting. No objections were made, and all of the students chose to participate.

The first author gathered evidence of students’ perceptions about DOL before and after the music-based intervention through Likert-scale questionnaires and evidence of student achievement with DOL before and after the intervention through weekly DOL quiz scores. Therefore, three data collection instruments were utilized in this study: pre-intervention questionnaires, post-intervention questionnaires, and weekly DOL quizzes. The pre-intervention questionnaire (Appendix B) served as a source of baseline data designed to provide evidence of the students’ perceptions of their engagement and performance with DOL. The questions asked the students to gauge the user-friendliness of the material that had been used for their DOL lessons to date, rate how useful they felt the activity was for them personally, and express whether or not they liked DOL lessons as much as any other instructional activities in their language arts class. Students entered a response to the questions on a scale ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree,” and an option of “No Opinion” was available.

The post-intervention questionnaire asked students to respond to similar statements as those in the pre-intervention survey, with the exception that this instrument assessed their perceptions of the music-based DOL lessons after the five week intervention. This instrument (Appendix C) also included an optional section for the students to write a comment about what they thought of the music-based DOL lessons and how DOL lessons could be improved. Thirteen of fifteen participants completed the questionnaires.

The students' yearly scores from their DOL quizzes for nineteen weeks before the study began served as baseline data about student achievement with DOL. These scores were taken from the computerized gradebook and entered into an Excel worksheet. The quiz format during the intervention remained the same, with two sentences from the week appearing on the quiz (Appendix D). Data collection then continued with the same format as the collection of the students' yearly DOL scores, with the students' music-based DOL scores entered into an Excel worksheet and analyzed in a bar graph.

Data Analysis

Surveys indicating student perceptions of DOL were analyzed by a simple tallying method. As each survey had five questions with five possible answers, responses were tallied and percentages of students who indicated each possible answer were calculated. Post-intervention surveys also provided students with the opportunity to comment on the effectiveness of the music-based DOL lessons; however, few students provided written comments, and of those, only 13% offered more than a single sentence response. Due to the brevity of the answers, these responses were tallied according to positive and negative response categories.

Daily Oral Language quiz score data were analyzed in an Excel worksheet. Nineteen weeks of pre-intervention quiz scores were entered and calculated according to a simple averaging method. Five weeks of post-intervention quiz scores were also calculated under simple averaging; however, this set of data was calculated separately in order to compare pre- and post-intervention quiz scores. Data for both yearly and intervention scores were also incorporated into a bar chart for visual comparisons of whether progress and increased student learning occurred with the intervention method (Figure 1).

Findings

Analysis of the pre- and post-intervention data suggests that music-based grammar mini-lessons dramatically improved student engagement and student achievement in Daily Oral Language. Students reported enjoying DOL more, finding the music-based DOL format to be user-friendly, and feeling more positive about their grammar learning, all related to their level of engagement with grammar mini-lessons. In addition to the positive outcomes related to student engagement, participants greatly improved their scores on weekly DOL quizzes, evidence of improved student achievement.

Student engagement with Daily Oral Language was evident in a variety of ways. First, the vast majority of participants liked music-based DOL as much as any other language arts work. An astounding 93% reported enjoying DOL post-intervention, up from only 46% pre-intervention. The remaining 7% offered no opinion; therefore, no participants reported disliking DOL. It seems that liking grammar mini-lessons is a critical outcome of this study. If nearly all students enjoyed a daily grammar activity, it may be possible to teach grammar at other times during class meetings with different pedagogies and avoid the resistance to learning grammar so typical of language arts students.

Second, participants found the music-based DOL sentences to be easy to use and understand, which may explain why so many of them reported liking DOL. Pre-intervention, 62% believed the sentences were user-friendly (38% disagreed, 31% had no opinion), and 31% could usually find errors

on their own (38% disagreed, 31% had no opinion). Post-intervention, 93% believed the sentences were user-friendly (7% offered no opinion), and 69% could find errors on their own (23% offered no opinion, 8% disagreed). An effort was made to create similarly challenging music-based DOL sentences compared with those the students had experienced prior to the intervention, yet most participants found the post-intervention sentences easier to understand and correct. This finding is relevant to student engagement with DOL since it would seem incredibly difficult for students to correct grammar in sentences that were unclear to them.

Third, participants felt more positive about their grammar learning in DOL. Though the pre-questionnaire answers revealed 63% already believed DOL was helpful in understanding grammar and transferring learned skills to speaking and writing, an increase to 77% was evident post-intervention. Despite students generally feeling DOL was helpful for learning grammar before the intervention, the increase is still an important improvement. Evidence about students' perceptions of their grammar learning from forced-response statements on the questionnaires was further supported by the open-ended comments section. Most participants (69%) offered short responses. Though 11% held negative opinions about DOL, saying "I think they are confusing," 89% expressed positive opinions of the music-based strategy. Typical positive comments included, "It was good," "I love the music based DOL because it teaches you about the people [the musicians] and it lets you have good grammar," and "It's fun but it also helps with teaching everybody and even me." This last comment, and the words "even me," implies a change in a student's perception of his or her own ability, and this is one of the greatest successes of the intervention and the project. Underscoring the shift to positive perceptions of grammar learning with DOL, participants used the words "love" and "fun" in reference to grammar mini-lessons. The teacher's observations of the class's behavior during the five week intervention further supported their engagement. Most of the students were curious as to whom the teacher had chosen as the musician or band of the day, and they would often stop by her classroom early in the day in order find out. During DOL while the music was playing, students would hum, dance, and move their heads to the music. One particularly enjoyable moment was when Aretha Franklin's "Respect" had almost everyone in the class singing along on the refrain. Although this may not seem overly important to learning grammar, the important issue was that music encouraged engagement with the lesson. It is clear that opportunities for student engagement increased as a result of this study, but student achievement was also evidenced in the weekly quiz score data.

When the students' nineteen Daily Oral Language quiz scores recorded since the beginning of the school year were analyzed, the pre-intervention data revealed that 74% of the students averaged a "C" or below for their yearly DOL scores. Of these students, 27% earned an average grade of "C," 33% fell into the "D" category, and 13% averaged yearly scores that were in the failing category. Among the remaining 27% of the class, 7% placed in the "A" category, 7% placed in the "B" category, and 13% fell into the "C" grade range. These students had been grouped together because they had performed poorly on standardized tests in the past, and the pre-intervention method of DOL instruction did not appear to be an effective strategy for increasing learning and changing the students' test score patterns.

After five weeks of music-based DOL, a second set of weekly quiz scores were analyzed. The results, when compared to the pre-intervention yearly DOL scores, suggested a significant improvement in student learning (see Figure 1). Whereas prior to the intervention, 27% of the students fell into the "A," "B," and "C" categories, the post-intervention scores revealed that a surprising 34% of the students now fell within the "A" category alone. Of the remaining students, 40% had an average "B" grade, 19% averaged a "C," and 7% had an average grade of "D." This means that the overall class scores rose from 27% to 93% with grades of "C" or above. The students with the lowest grades of 18 and 19 ("D" range) still showed improvement since the yearly average scores for these students had previously been a failing (F) grade of 16, the equivalent of 64%. The encouraging increase in student engagement and achievement in Daily Oral Language as evidenced on pre- and post-intervention

questionnaires and weekly quiz scores supports the assertion that when students are engaged with DOL, they perform better on measures of learning.

Conclusions, Limitations, and Implications

The music-based intervention strategy appeared to have been a highly effective method of engaging the students, and the findings suggest that it effectively increased student learning during the five weeks for which the strategy was used. Some students said they work better when they are listening to music, and in spite of any humming or singing during DOL, the students did not take any longer than usual to finish the work at hand. In fact, there had been times during the pre-intervention DOL lessons that correcting the two sentences took much longer due to the need to remind students who were not working to be on task. When students enjoyed the music and content of the lesson, however, the outcomes were student engagement, student learning, and an enhanced classroom atmosphere.

Student quiz scores suggested that the engagement strategy was effective and that the music-based DOL methodology accomplished more than simply working towards a positive classroom atmosphere. As the study of Kane (1996) indicated, it is important to reach students through content that they find interesting and relevant. The underlying focus of teaching grammar is not lost, but instead is enhanced, when the students are able to connect with the subject matter of a prescriptive lesson. This seemed to have been the case with these students during the music-based DOL intervention strategy. One implication is that grammar instruction can be both fun and effective.

Another study referenced earlier, that of Van Zile (2003), encouraged movement as a way to increase engagement, and perhaps this effect was at play in the results of this study. The students in this class were weary of school by seventh period, and they often tended to be restless and unfocused. The music, however, and the students' engagement with it seemed to help them release some energy and remain focused on the task at hand. It might prove useful in the future to study whether the strategic use of music in lessons typically viewed as unexciting might help to increase student engagement. Another avenue for future research might involve allowing students to help develop content material for grammar instruction.

Although the overall findings indicated both an increased level of engagement and learning, there were limitations inherent to this study that may or may not affect whether the music-based DOL would be as effective in a long-term intervention. The time-frame involved was short, only five weeks, and this timeframe does not show whether or not the students may have viewed this strategy as a novelty. A longer study would be helpful in order to show if engagement levels and student scores remained high. Another limitation was that the number of students in the study was small with only fifteen students in seventh period. Of course, this study was designed as collaborative action research conducted in one teacher's classroom to improve her practice and her students' learning, and she did generate useful local knowledge. We cannot say whether her findings apply in other classrooms and situations, but they are encouraging enough to try. A final issue that came up during the course of events was that some students had frequent absences. The result of this attendance problem was that even with the use of make-up quizzes, some students' averages were based on four test scores instead of five. In spite of the limitations, however, the students seemed to enjoy the music-based intervention and, overall, the scores increased significantly. Another very positive result of the project was that the students' attitudes towards the music-based DOL strategy contributed to a positive classroom environment.

The enhanced classroom atmosphere suggests that the music-based DOL strategy might be particularly useful if incorporated during times in the instructional calendar during which student engagement and participation are historically lower. Student engagement in the classroom under study seemed particularly high at the beginning of each semester, but it seemed that the midway points of late October through November and late February through March were times when the

students seemed to have more difficulty staying on task. Using the music-based DOL methodology during these months could prove useful in helping the students maintain a higher level of engagement with grammar instruction throughout the year. We believe, however, that this strategy must be a part of a variety of instructional methods that are used for DOL and grammar instruction in general, in order to maintain a consistently high level of student interest. Just as Cambourne (1995) discovered, “engagement (is) the key” (186), and we have learned through the action research process that this philosophy is central to our own beliefs about teaching.

Music-based Daily Oral Language shows promise for transforming a district mandate into an engaging and effective way to teach grammar. The search for interesting ways to present grammar lessons to students continues for language arts teachers everywhere. Perhaps it would be worthwhile to utilize daily news for content, as did Kane (1996), or have students teach each other the concepts they have mastered, as did Breznek and Scott (2003). While the foundations of a good education will always be based on certain principles, including learning grammar in order to communicate effectively, a major implication of this study is that interesting and relevant content can contextualize learning and promote engagement and achievement.

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Appendix A

Sample of Intervention DOL Content



- A. Chris Brown born in 1989 is alot like any teenager.
- B. One minute hes under the covers pleading for five more minutes of sleep the next minute hes racing threw a day of recording and interviews.

http://chrisbrownworld.com/index_main.html

Sample of Intervention DOL Content / Revisions



- A. Chris Brown , born in 1989 , is a lot like any teenager.
- B. One minute he 's under the covers ple ading for five more minutes of sleep , the next minute he 's racing through a day of recording and interviews.

http://chrisbrownworld.com/index_main.html

Appendix B

Pre-Intervention Survey

Dear student,

As you know, daily oral language lessons are a big part of our language arts classroom content. I would appreciate your help in analyzing the materials we use and their effectiveness. Please answer the following questions honestly. Your opinions are valuable, but they can only be useful if they truly reflect your experiences with DOL.

Fill in the circle of the answer that is correct for you:

1. The sentences we use are easy to read and understand.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- No opinion
- Agree
- Strongly agree

2. I like DOL exercises as much as I like most of our other language arts work.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- No opinion
- Agree
- Strongly agree

3. I can usually find most (or all) of the errors in our daily oral language lessons before we go over them together.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- No opinion
- Agree
- Strongly agree

4. Daily Oral Language lessons are helpful to me in understanding how to correct grammar errors.

- Strongly disagree

- Disagree
- No opinion
- Agree
- Strongly agree

5. Daily oral language lessons help me to use correct grammar and improve my own writing.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- No opinion
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Appendix C

Post-Intervention Survey

Music-Based Daily Oral Language Opinion Survey

Fill in the circle of the answer that is correct for you:

1. The sentences in our music-based DOL lessons were easy to read and understand.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- No opinion
- Agree
- Strongly agree

2. I like the music-based DOL exercises as much as I like most of our other language arts work.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- No opinion
- Agree

Strongly agree

3. I could usually find most (or all) of the errors in our music-based daily oral language lessons before we went over them together.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

No opinion

Agree

Strongly agree

4. The music-based DOL lessons are helpful to me in understanding how to correct grammar errors.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

No opinion

Agree

Strongly agree

5. The music-based DOL lessons help me to use correct grammar and improve my own writing.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

No opinion

Agree

Strongly agree

Comments and Suggestions:

Please take a moment to tell me about your experience with the music-based DOL lessons and also to offer any suggestions of how you think DOL might be improved.

Appendix D

Sample Intervention DOL Quiz

Name: _____ Period: _____

DOL Quiz #26

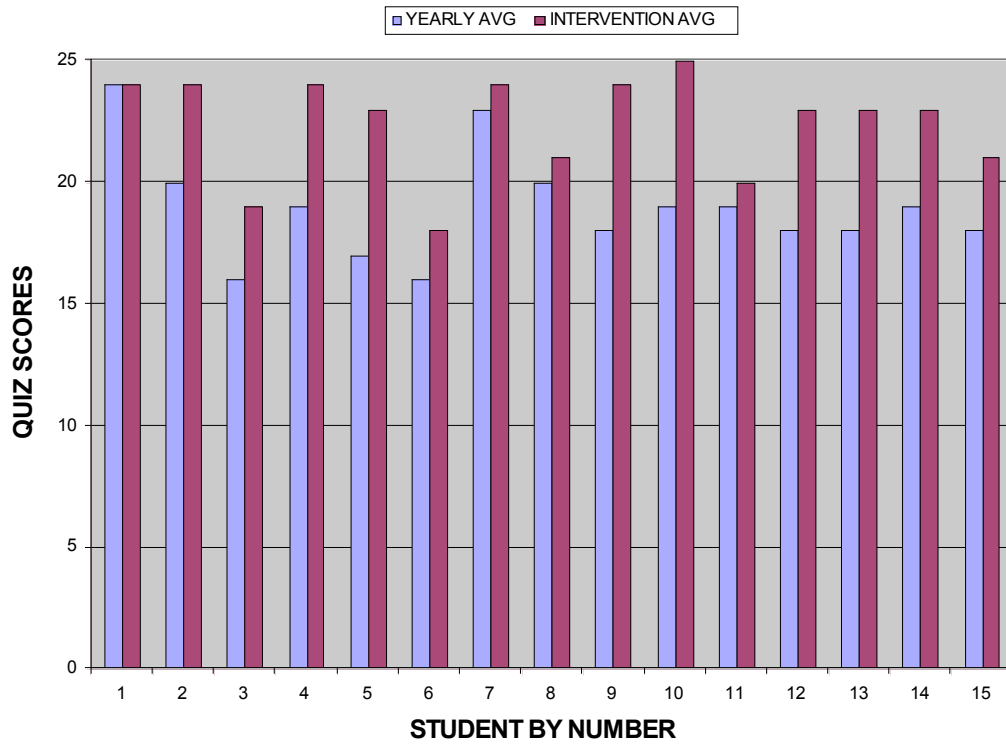
A. Chris Brown born in 1989 is alot like any teenager.

B. One minute hes under the covers pleading for five more minutes of sleep the next minute hes racing threw a day of recording and interviews.

Figure 1

Yearly and Intervention Average Scores

YEARLY AND INTERVENTION AVERAGE SCORES



Using Projects in the Middle School Mathematics Classroom

Nancy Ruppert

Project-based learning has its descriptive roots in the field of constructivism. Dewey(1966) in the 30s and 40s (Hands-On, Real Life Application), Piaget (the need for Concrete to Abstract) in the 50s and Bloom in the 60s (Bloom’s Taxonomy) provided teachers with language that addressed a deeper understanding of how children learn, thus paving the way for teachers to communicate consistently about learners, learning, and teaching (Santrock, 2001). Classrooms in the 21st century have now added technology to the underpinnings of theory and practice providing teachers with more opportunities to infuse projects into the classroom (Pflaum, 2004). In addition, project based learning has been shown to impact children’s abilities to apply real life problems and to develop their creativity (Tsai, 1997).

Research based on constructivism suggests that when students are engaged in project based learning, they develop skills that include collaboration, communication, and cooperation (Wang, Laffey, & Poole, 2001). Studies suggest that students who engage in project based learning are more motivated than their counterparts who learn in a more traditional, lecture-based setting (Lenschow, 1998; SRI, 2000). McHale (2006) described a school-wide program in Michigan in which students participate in project-based learning. Results of that study suggest that students are “working more collaboratively, moving around, and depending more on one another than the teacher” (p. 18).

Examples of Projects

During my first year of teaching I had to teach the metric system. I had conducted activities in my physical science course as an undergraduate, but did not have a deep understanding of it. Fortunately, I had been taught how to develop resource units and so I had the skills to find the materials I needed. In order to help my students apply the skills and use metrics in a meaningful way, I had them create a metric scrapbook. We examined metrics (meters, liters, and grams) in multiple ways. They taught me a shortcut for converting metric units. And with games, activities, and creativity, we explored the metric system. I still have some of the resources from that unit (purple dittos) that I share with my college students. The project was teacher directed. There were no options, but the students were engaged in the project and showed motivation and creativity.

Several years later, I infused projects in a learning styles unit on percents. While students did not create a large project, for each objective students had to display their learning in an art form. They explored advertisements to choose items they were interested in and calculated percents. They became business owners and determined savings. That same year I developed a unit on consumer math. Students brainstormed types of jobs they wanted, how much they paid and calculated earnings. They compared prices of grocery items and determined discounts on school uniforms. Both of these units integrated “learning styles” with the units and projects were part of each of the objectives. During these projects, students had choices. I found that students were comfortable making the choices when given several options.

I then moved to projects outside the regular classroom. While teaching in the inner-city, students had to complete a project each nine weeks. The first nine weeks, students had to interview five people about jobs they had and find out how they used math in their line of work. This project allowed my students to communicate with adults, hear about possible jobs, and realize that mathematics were part of every career path.

A second project with this class consisted of my students having to cook a meal for their parents and share all the mathematics they used. Their parent had to sign that they had completed

the project. Their third project was to design a dream house that had a square, triangle, rectangle, and circle in the floor plan. Their task was to determine the surface area of the floor plan. A fourth and final project for this class, was to choose a sports figure they were interested in and share statistics about them or create an art project that used geometry. The purpose of each of these projects was to have my students engage with adults about mathematics and to be able to communicate mathematically. These projects took place outside the classroom after students had mastered the material. Students' work samples were displayed in the classroom and students shared what they learned. I found that students who participated in the projects showed more confidence and tried harder. Their grades were also better.

From my early days of using project based learning, I have begun to seek ways to integrate math and science. By having students see the connections that math and science share, it is my belief that students will begin to see a bigger picture of their world and will be better prepared to gain a deeper understanding of both sets of concepts. The Noonday Project (Ihor, 2004) was a project in which gifted students participated in discovering The Circumference of the Earth. This experiment has been identified as one of the top 10 beautiful physics experiments (Crease, 2002). We used the CIESE (The Center for Innovation in Engineering and Science Education) website to communicate with other schools around the world. Students upload their data to compare central angles while identifying scientific phenomenon.

The second project (Project-Based Learning Event –PBLE) was designed for ESL children who represented 12 different nationalities. The name of this project was Wonderful Wednesdays. We used maps and geography to compare distances, time changes, and flight information around the world. ESL students were “mentored” by college students. Their projects were brochures that illustrated their findings. The initial assessment indicated that the students had no knowledge of distance, time or cost. After the project, they were able to compare and contrast each of the elements from one country to the next.

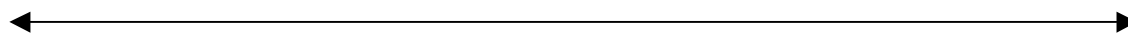
A third project (PBLE) was also designed for middle school children. The name of this project is “How I Weathered 6th Grade” and uses weather data, observational skills, journal writing, and statistics. This project includes a website called www.weatherbugachieve.com. The final project is a journal summary that illustrates a weather timeline that will be displayed in the hallway.

A fourth project (PBLE) has been conducted with elementary, middle, high school and college students. The name of this project is “The Geometry of Me” and involves students selecting something they love to do and looking at how geometry is represented in their passion. Students take the Standard Course of Study, look for terms and concepts, take digital images or select images off the internet. They add dialogue to create a Microsoft Moviemaker® project.

From my experiences, I have developed a continuum to describe project based learning from a low-impact level to an independent-inquiry level. Teachers who have never used project-based learning may be more comfortable starting at a low-impact level and moving up the continuum. Theoretically, students will benefit differently at different levels of the continuum depending on their own learning styles.

A Continuum of Projects Model

A Project-Based Continuum for Mathematics Teachers



This continuum displays different levels of projects that can be implemented in the classroom. The most basic level of project based learning (PBLE) is a **teacher directed** project. Anytime students are engaged in using their mathematical knowledge to create a visual display of their understanding, they are involved in project based learning. Suppose we invite our students to create origami cubes and while teaching them how to make the cubes we are using mathematical terminology. Once students have created their cubes, we ask them to share what they know about such terms as isosceles triangles, 180° rotations, symmetry, and individual shapes (trapezoids, triangles, parallelograms...). Tessellations are a good project to make with students to help them identify characteristics of quadrilaterals. Students can create pie graphs of how they spend their typical Tuesday, or create a pie graph of pollution using pizza pie cardboard and hands-on materials. The key to teacher directed projects is that students have the opportunity to share their knowledge with one another (in language arts we call this think-pair-share). In my own teaching I found that whenever I could present concepts using art tools, I was reaching a large percentage of my class. Teacher directed projects can reinforce concepts or introduce students to concepts.

A second level of project based learning is working on **individual investigations in small groups** that involve creating a project. The key to working with small groups is to have options that middle school students can select. By having multiple activities, middle school students can not only make choices, but they can also direct their focus to interests they have. One example of this is the Scrapbook. I used this activity when I first taught students about the metric system. Students investigated various aspects of length, mass, and volume. These investigations were paired with class discussions. Students created their own scrapbooks about the metric system including poems, teaching a family member how to convert metric units, creating bumper stickers, and problems that had to do with metrics. While students were working at their own pace, they sat near one another so that they could help one another. Once they completed the scrapbook they worked together to present skits demonstrating their metric understanding.

A third level of working with project-based learning is to infuse **learning styles with individual activities**. I conducted a unit of percents and one on consumer math for middle school students. Initially, the students participated in the Dunn and Dunn (1986) Learning Styles Inventory. I found that 80% of my students could (theoretically) learn independent of my standing in front of them. Of those 20% who preferred to be given direct instruction, all of them were lower readers. We discussed the different types of learners that existed in our classroom. By tailoring the content study to different learning styles, students were able to follow directions and investigate objectives. For each objective, there were projects that students could create to display their understanding. At the end of this project, 85% of the students had scored an 80 or above on a standardized test that assessed their understanding of the relationship between fractions, decimals, and percents, and their abilities to calculate unknown values that included percents problems. A survey also indicated that 95% of the students “loved” percents. While the results were very positive, the students shared that they wanted me to just teach them because they didn’t have to work so hard.

A second example of this is when students explored different regions of the world and compared countries’ economies. The project allowed students to research a randomly chosen country to identify distance, time of day at noon, and the cost of a flight. Students researched these aspects, searched the internet for photographs of the country, and made travel brochures to illustrate their understanding. When they were given a pre-test, none of the students had any idea how far away their country was, what time it was, or how much it would cost to fly there. This project allowed students a context with which to communicate with tutors and helped them gain a deeper understanding of number sense. We displayed the brochures in the hallway on a bulletin board.

Because the countries chosen were countries in which students had originated, this particular project supported different cultures.

A fourth level of project based learning includes **integration**. My colleague and I have created a course in which we have taken the ten most beautiful science experiments and together our students have to illustrate beautiful mathematical formulas that are associated with the experiments and they must integrate historical phenomenon about the scientists and mathematicians associated with the experiments and formulas and what was happening in history at the time of their inventions. The project is a presentation in which students creatively recreate and share their findings. One project that middle school gifted students participated in was The Noonday Project, recreating the discovery of the circumference of the earth using the autumnal equinox and central angles. Eratosthenes' discovery is listed as one of the top ten most beautiful physics experiments. Students shared their knowledge using poems, posters, and skits.

A fifth model (PBLE) **integrates** mathematics with the scientific process. Students participate in discussions and work individually or together to develop scientific phenomenon. One study allowed gifted students to examine electromagnetic forces by having students create displays of Maglev's concepts (Budd, 2003). The project revolves around inquiry based thinking in which students work together to create projects and examine the connections between math and science.

Recommendations for Implementing Project-Based Strategies

1. Students must master content. Using standards (NCTM or State), teachers must help students make connections between knowledge and their world. This may be done with manipulatives combined with direct instruction. Consider giving students a pre-test to determine how to differentiate instruction in your classroom. If there are students who have a base-knowledge, consider allowing them to work on projects. By giving students the standards that they are expected to demonstrate, students begin to see a connection between what is expected and their own abilities to choose how to illustrate that knowledge.
2. Students must be able to communicate what they know about mathematics. Discourse was a common buzzword in the NCTM (1989) standards. Teachers need to find ways to help students express their understanding. Individual conferences aid students who may not be as strong in their written communication. Exit slips and journal drawings may also be used to help students communicate and make connections. Asking students to share their projects with one another also supports communication. When students work together on projects, there is more potential for them to gain a deeper understanding of content. A focus for teachers is to provide enough structure of what is expected during group work time.
3. When connections are discovered, teachers need to celebrate students' leaps. By making connections and celebrating them, students will begin to develop a deeper understanding of content. Posting discoveries on a bulletin board and acknowledging the discoverers can create an atmosphere of inquiry as the norm.
4. Teachers need to be willing to work together to create and implement projects with your classes. Taking risks and starting small will help teachers gain more confidence and can help students learn how to be responsible for their own learning.

Project based learning reflects a movement toward increasing the amount of self-direction students participate in. Moving from teacher directed projects to student generated projects allows students to use resources available to them to illustrate their knowledge. Further research is needed to identify the impact of project based learning on students' abilities to problem solve and to make connections.

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Project Based Learning With Middle Grades Pre-Service Teachers
By Rodney White, Eastern Kentucky University

This article will describe a model for project based learning with pre-service middle grades social studies teachers. An overview of project based learning will be given, a rationale for its use as an instructional model in social studies education (P-16) will be offered, and a description of how it currently is being used with pre-service middle grades social studies teachers at Eastern Kentucky University will be presented. Practical suggestions also will be offered for social studies teachers who desire to implement project based learning in their classes.

Project based learning is a comprehensive approach to teaching and learning that encompasses curriculum, instruction, assessment and motivation. Blumenfeld, Soloway, Marx, Krajcik, Guzial, & Palincsar (1991) described it as a process where students actively seek answers to relevant or authentic questions. Activities include in-depth, sustained student investigations through asking and refining questions, discussing and debating ideas, making predictions, collecting and analyzing data, drawing conclusions, and communicating findings to others by creating artifacts, demonstrations, or exhibitions. On a practical level, projects require students to demonstrate an understanding of identified concepts and skills in a variety of ways other than the traditional end of unit pencil and paper test. Kellough & Kellough (2003) explained that for meaningful learning to occur, independent study, individual writing, student-centered projects, and oral reports should be common methods employed by teachers of young adolescents.

Actively engaging learners through the use of project based learning has been a consistent theme in educational literature for many years. From the writings of early 20th century Progressive educators, the importance of active, student-centered learning has been advocated. Bagley (1921) stated that projects might completely transform school life and that the project method represented a synthesis of ideas in educational theory into a single and unified pattern of educational procedure. Specifically, Bagley explained that the most significant features of the project method were its emphasis on purposeful activity and the potential for the transfer of skills and information learned in a project setting.

Contemporary educational ideas related to constructivism, multiple intelligences theory, and differentiation, have continued to provide a clearer theoretical framework for the use of project based learning. Research in the areas of neuroscience and psychology also has broadened views of learning. Rather than being a static process of a teacher imparting information to students primarily through direct instruction, learning is dynamic, contextual, and social and based on various modes of delivery and alternative forms of assessment (Markham, Larmer, & Ravitz, 2003).

When one considers the broad and sometimes ambiguous nature of social studies, it clearly becomes apparent that project based learning is most relevant and needed. Social studies teachers are confronted with the perennial questions of what to teach, to what degree, and by what means. The persistent dilemma, maybe Achilles heel, has been the issue of breadth versus depth. Newmann (1988) described typical history and social studies classrooms as *addicted to*

coverage. He explained that this emphasis on coverage leads to a mindlessness as students are exposed to broad surveys of numerous topics at a rapid pace in the all too familiar name of covering the content. In today's schools with the fixation over testing, the pressure to "cover" the material continues to present a challenge to meaningful and in-depth learning.

There are two primary instructional goals in using project based learning in my social studies methods course. One is for pre-service teachers to develop or extend their understanding of the five social studies strands identified in Kentucky's Core Content for Social Studies Assessment (2006) and Program of Studies (2006). The five strands are: civics and government, culture and society, economics, geography, and historical perspective. My students typically have completed a 24 to 27 hour emphasis in history and social science courses as required for certification. These courses are independent of each other and provide little depth across the various social science disciplines. Compounding this is the fact that the course work often does not address the content they will be required to teach as student teachers and beginning teachers in Kentucky.

The second goal in using project based learning is for pre-service teachers to continue to develop professional knowledge and skills relative to teaching middle school students. Specific professional skills targeted during this project include unit and lesson planning, designing alternative assessments, locating a variety of professional materials and resources relative to their topic, and demonstrating developmentally appropriate social studies teaching methodologies during the project presentation. Students are presented with these overall guiding questions:

1. What content should I know and understand about this topic in order to teach it to middle school students effectively?
2. What should a middle school student know and understand about this topic?
3. How will I teach the knowledge, skills, and concepts relative to this topic in a way that will promote in-depth understanding?

The reader should understand that the following activities described are for pre-service teachers and may not be directly transferable to middle school students. However, the topics described are relevant as social studies topics in both the middle school classroom as well as a social studies methods course. The following examples are stated in thematic terms. A thematic approach to social studies content provides an important foundation for project based learning. By developing themes, teachers can move students beyond the artificial and fragmented learning that occurs in a textbook-centered classroom and examine a topic in a more holistic context. Following are selected examples of project-based assignments frequently used with my methods students.

The Axial Age: 800-200BCE

The Axial Age, named by German philosopher Karl Jaspers, was a period of time in which significant religious thought developed in four distinct regions of the world: Confucianism and Daoism in China; Hinduism and Buddhism in India; monotheism in Israel; and philosophical rationalism in Greece. This age was pivotal in the spiritual development of humanity and was one of the most seminal periods of intellectual, psychological, and philosophical and religious change in

recorded history (Hick, 1982; Armstrong, 2006). Essential questions to consider as you research your topic are:

- 1.) Why is the development of religious thought during this time in different places of the world significant?
- 2.) How does culture influence religion? How does religion influence culture?
- 3.) What does it mean to be spiritual? What does it mean to be religious?
- 4.) Regarding this highly personal topic, what would you want to convey to middle school students?

Students are presented this prompt along with excerpts from the readings cited and the guiding questions listed above. Depending on the size of the group one or two students may be asked to consider religion from a different perspective. They are assigned the concept of freedom of religion with regard to the 1st Amendment. Specifically, students are asked to research the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause. I typically assign the 1980 United States Supreme Court case, *Stone v. Graham*, which dealt with the posting of the Ten Commandments in public schools. The 2005 case, *McCreary County, Kentucky v. ACLU of Kentucky* provides additional context for this issue and shows how legal precedent shapes judicial decisions.

Religion, religious beliefs, a unit on world religions, and a study of religion in the public square in America are important topics and can be integrated into a number of different history or social studies classes. Religion is universal to humans and extends beyond any one culture, region of the world, or historical era. But more than that, understanding this issue and the controversy surrounding it is critical to being an informed and knowledgeable citizen. Students, whether they are middle schoolers or college pre-service teachers, should grapple with issues such as this and attempt to become aware of the issues, questions, and sometimes misinformation surrounding such issues. There is a deliberate attempt with this topic to challenge pre-service teachers to think about things that might be uncomfortable for them, but this is necessary in order for them to be able to provide sound instruction for their future students. Hopefully, they will come to see common elements of religion and spirituality across cultures and religions. These are concepts, when properly taught, that can be presented to middle school students in a meaningful and substantive way.

These pre-service teachers may demonstrate their projects in different ways. A common mode of exhibition chosen is a museum exhibit in which artifacts and information about the different world religions are presented. On other occasions groups choose to use a multimedia presentation. These examples are suitable for middle school class projects as well. In addition, middle school students could complete graphic organizers and visual charts that illustrate common religious elements of different religions. Asking middle school students to debate, write an editorial, or draw an editorial cartoon about current 1st Amendment issues relative to freedom of religion also are good project choices.

Culture, like religion, is a concept central to social studies and history. This concept crosses disciplinary boundaries within social studies and history as well as beyond the discipline. In order to teach adolescents about their world, teachers can focus on cultures that are significant politically and economically like China, India, or the Middle East. Or, culture easily can become a point of emphasis from a historical perspective with a study of ancient Greece, Rome, or

Native American cultures. This is obvious to in-service social studies teachers since this is typical social studies content. However, unless teachers identify a few specific points of emphasis and ask students to demonstrate knowledge and understanding through project based learning, this concept easily can be missed in the maze of information typically presented to students in the name of “covering the content.” Following is one project based example used with the concept of culture.

Another Land, Another Culture

Culture is a concept central to virtually all social studies classes at virtually all grade levels. For your project, consider culture in a broad “social studies” context and look for ways to teach this concept to middle schoolers in a meaningful way. You might consider a culture that is significant historically. Or, you might choose one that is significant today in world political or economic terms. Or you simply might select a country **or** culture that is very unique and different from anything “we” or our students know. Your focus should be on this country or culture in terms of its culture and society, geography, history, political system, and its economic system.

Essential questions for you to consider on this topic are:

- 1.) Considering the topic of culture, what are important concepts teachers might teach regardless of which culture is being studied?
- 2.) Do you think the commonalities and similarities of people across cultures are more alike or different? Explain!
- 3.) How does one accurately and objectively teach about various world cultures of which we may not be all that knowledgeable?
- 4.) Since much social studies content relates to ancient cultures in faraway places, how will you make that relevant to a student in your classroom?

This topic works especially well when there are students in class from another country. These students become the natural experts and teachers within the group for their country or culture. When this has occurred, content presented by the group was accurate, misunderstandings about other cultures were clarified, and a unique perspective of hearing and seeing someone with first hand knowledge and experience triggered interest, curiosity, and questions from classmates. With the diversity common in society today, teachers have ever increasing opportunities within their own schools and communities to invite speakers who can share stories about other places and other cultures of the world in a way that goes beyond what textbooks and most instructional materials can.

Project activities for this topic for both pre-service teachers and middle school students could include a multimedia presentation, a poster display, or an illustrated picture book. Children’s picture books are especially useful in teaching social studies. Once middle school students understand what the characteristics of picture books are, then teachers can use this as a project-based learning artifact allowing students to demonstrate understanding by creating their own picture book with appropriate narrative text and visual illustrations.

For the final example presented I challenge my students to examine issues related to civic education, our democratic traditions, and their role as social studies professionals. This following example is presented to students.

We the People, In Order to Form A More Union

The challenge for this group is to consider the present state of American democracy. Have we realized the ideals stated in the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution or even in the speeches and writings of Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King? Examine carefully these “founding documents” and consider their meaning.

Specifically consider these guiding questions:

- 1.) What are the historical roots of our democratic system?
- 2.) What elements characterize most modern democracies?
- 3.) What American ideals and ideas (documents) have shaped democratic traditions in America?
4. To what degree does our democracy live up to Lincoln’s famous words, “government of the people, by the people, for the people?”
- 5.) What do the words to the Preamble mean for our government and for us as individual citizens?

This group has an additional task. Read carefully Articles I, II, and III of the United States Constitution. Beyond the “typical” often superficial explanation of the three branches of government, look specifically at parts of these three articles. For Article I, read Section 8 and Section 9, Clauses 2 and 3. What are some things Congress can and cannot do? For Article II, read about the Electoral College. What is it? Why do we have it? How does it work? Or, does it work? Read Article III and tell us what is so significant about the Supreme Court? The late great author and former social studies educator, James Michener (1987), said the Supreme Court was the most unique part of our democratic system and the one thing that distinguished us most from other nations of the world? What do you think he might have meant by this statement?

Historically, the overarching purpose for social studies has been “civic” or “citizenship” education. These words often are tossed about without giving much thought to what they really mean. What is it we should be doing in schools, if in fact, we really are trying to develop “good” citizens? And what is a “good” citizen? Does this topic relate to civic education? As a middle school teacher, what specifically will you do to help promote good citizenship habits from your students?

Ideas and ideals relating to civic education and citizenship should be incorporated into social studies classes at all levels. Pre-service teachers should understand the historical emphasis civic education has held in the social studies curriculum and begin to think about how they will approach this topic with their students. Rather than read about these documents in a social studies textbook, I encourage my students to read the documents as original source materials.

Hopefully, the documents will become less mysterious to teachers and they in turn will ask their students to read not just from their textbooks, but also from the actual documents.

For this project demonstration, a Meet the Press role play format works very well. Students can be assigned historical figures to role play or they can portray contemporary political leaders as they debate various constitutional and political issues. Role play, skits, and simulations are activities that can be used effectively at the middle school level, maybe even more enthusiastically than at the college level.

Anytime one proposes what the curriculum should be in social studies, the slide down the slippery slope has begun. These examples of project-based topics are by no means a comprehensive list of possible topics for social studies teachers. However, they do provide a starting point for thinking about content that is important to the field of social studies, and that lends itself to in-depth and thematic project based learning. In addition, the content draws from both the cognitive and affective domains and provides opportunities for both pre-service teachers as well as middle school students to grapple with issues from both an intellectual and personal standpoint.

When implementing project based learning into social studies classes, teachers should design projects with the end product in mind. The assessment measures should be developed first along with guiding or essential questions. This should provide both teacher and students the road map for the project and clarify what knowledge and skills should be demonstrated. Useful projects obviously should require students to demonstrate understanding of important content, but they also should require demonstration of specific skill competencies. Markham, Larmer, & Ravitz (2003) explained that with literacy being such a concern in schools today, student exhibitions, demonstrations and products should include clear evidence of skill proficiency in reading, writing, speaking, using technology, and working cooperatively and productively in a group. Practical examples appropriate for middle school social studies are numerous. Museum exhibits, illustrated picture books, historical scrapbooks, authentic writing in the form of diaries, journals, or letters, mock trials, role plays or skits, and designing and creating concrete models are all good middle school projects that require students to read, write, speak, use appropriate media and technology and work collaboratively with classmates.

In summary, what is proposed in this article is based on personal teaching experience of many years at both the middle school level and in the teacher education classroom and on a clear philosophical and theoretical foundation dating from the early 20th century until the present. Project based learning is **not** something teachers do, sometimes as critics suggest, only because it is fun for students and it keeps them “busy.” Project based learning is not activity for the sake of activity but rather a way to engage students in meaningful learning experiences.

The constant instructional and curricular challenge for all social studies teachers is one that encompasses the entire teaching and learning process: curriculum, instruction, assessment, and motivation. Project based learning offers teachers a comprehensive approach to teaching and learning and, when implemented well, provides opportunity for in-depth and meaningful learning by students.

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