

The Power of Audience

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When student work culminates in a genuine product for an authentic audience, it makes a world of difference.

I was meeting with Laura, a first-year 6th grade Spanish teacher in an urban school. She slumped deep in her chair, exhausted after another frustrating day. Quite a contrast from her enthusiasm at our summer institute, where she had first encountered the idea of Expeditionary Learning Schools.

Laura had been particularly excited about *learning expeditions*—academic investigations that teach standards-based content and skills in the context of meaningful projects. Although she had not had time to design an expedition during our summer work together, she had developed a few ideas that she thought would engage students. She had received encouraging feedback when she presented them to her colleagues.

During the first three weeks of school, however, she received different feedback from her students—numerous eye rolls and incessant grumblings. All the activities she thought would appeal to them were greeted with yawns. They couldn't have cared less about her songs, dialogues, or posters. When I met her, she was returning from the copy machine with a stack of pages copied out of a Spanish workbook. "At least they'll be doing something you're supposed to do in Spanish class," she said grimly.

"Is there *anything* you did that seemed to get their attention?" I asked hopefully.

"Well, I asked them to make life-size posters of themselves and label the body parts in Spanish. I thought that would be fun, but mostly they just goofed around. At least they did something. But I know that's not really what expeditions are about."

"Do you have any other plans?" I asked.

"I thought it would be interesting to study some countries where they speak Spanish. But these kids are too difficult to manage, and it's too hard to organize. No, for now we'll just keep doing pages from the workbook."

How could I help this teacher?

I thought of a photograph my wife and son had just brought back from a two-week trip to Guatemala where they were helping to build houses in an Ixil community called San Juan Cotzal. Women and children were the main inhabitants of this highland village. Many of the men had been killed by either the Guatemalan army or guerrilla revolutionary forces. The photograph showed a small "school" in the village: a patchwork tin roof held up with some poles, with no walls, a dirt floor, and children of all ages gathered around the teacher. One

teacher for 40 kids.

For these children, most of whom spoke Ixil as their native language, the key to any future life outside their village (or to a productive life in their village) was to learn Spanish. But the school had few resources—and certainly no Spanish books to help children learn the language.

I told Laura about my family's trip and about the school's desperate need to teach its students Spanish. "Do you think your students could make simple books, first readers, that we could send to the Ixil children in Guatemala?"

She seemed interested. "But what about the district standards?"

"Let's say your students are going to write a simple story. Aren't characters an important part of a story?" I asked. "They'll need to learn the parts of the body to be able to describe their characters. And setting, isn't that an important part of a story? They'll have to learn about all the geographic terms and natural features: mountains, rivers, trees, sky, and so on. And plot, doesn't there have to be some action in a story? Won't they have to learn some verbs? And sentence construction? Aren't all these part of the standards?"

We went on exploring all the ways she could teach her students core content and skills in the context of making these books for the Ixil children. Because students were at different levels, some students could make an ABC book with pictures and Spanish words, and other students could add sentences. Students who already spoke Spanish could actually write more complex stories. All these would be authentic products, genuinely useful to various children in San Juan Cotzal.

The next week I visited Laura's class, told some stories about the conflict in Guatemala, and showed some photographs from San Juan Cotzal. Laura introduced the idea of making books to send to the children. In a short time, Spanish class was transformed from "Gotta do boring worksheets" to "Can we make books to send to these kids in Guatemala?"

To be honest, the finished books were not of particularly high quality. But at an exhibition of student work in which all the books were displayed, you would have thought the students had each won the Pulitzer Prize. They radiated pride. The parents were equally enthusiastic. Many had never seen their child work so hard to produce anything like this book. The students read their books to younger children learning Spanish at the elementary school. The school librarian put copies in the library.

Laura's students had learned much more than they would have from worksheets. Laura still had much to learn about improving quality by using models of exemplary work, establishing criteria for excellence, teaching students to give feedback, and supporting them through multiple drafts. But the culture of her classroom had changed. She had learned the first principle of getting students to take responsibility for their own work: the power of audience.

Why Audience?

Writing teachers know about the power of audience. When you write an essay, you have to know who your audience will be so that you can adjust your message and style accordingly.

Chorus and band directors know the power of audience. Why do students work so hard practicing the same passages over and over, week after week? Because the audience is coming for the concert!

But who is the audience for 99 percent of the work students do in school? Right—the teacher. If you happen to work with students who come to school eager to win their teachers' approval, you won't need to do much to motivate them. (There might be other problems ahead for students who do their work mainly to please their teachers, but that's another story.) But more and more students come to class with no desire to please their teachers and no vision of the role school might play on their path to success. They may have no one in their family who has traveled that road.

The most effective way to engage these students in learning is to create an authentic audience, giving them a sense that someone else (besides teachers and parents) cares about their work. They need to have a vision of a product that matters. They need to learn content and develop skills to complete the product. One of the first things we consider when we design curriculum in Expeditionary Learning Schools is how students can apply knowledge and skills in creating a product that will serve an authentic community need.

Examples of Authentic Audience

Dimillo's Floating Restaurant

Make sure to bring your family with you when you eat at Dimillo's Floating Restaurant in Portland, Maine. The children won't mind waiting for their meal because they'll be busy working on the activity book created by 2nd graders at East End Community School.

Teachers Holly Merrow and Nancy Hess invited owner Johnnie Dimillo to their class to talk to students about a problem at his famous seafood restaurant. He told them how kids often got bored waiting for their food, a problem 2nd graders could relate to. He asked the students whether, as part of their study of ocean habitats, they could create an activity book to keep children engaged until their order was ready.

Teachers and students looked at models of activity books and brainstormed a list of the things they might include in theirs. To produce a high-quality product that the restaurant could really use, they found that they needed to master much content and many skills.

One of the essential features of products in Expeditionary Learning Schools is that they demonstrate mastery of the learning targets. The activity book the 2nd graders created showed their scientific understanding of ocean habitats, life cycles, and systems, as well as form and function. For example, one page, which traced a lobster's journey from the ocean to the table at Dimillo's Floating Restaurant, required them to build their economic understanding of goods and services. The students spent a day on a lobster boat and interviewed the captain. They visited a lobster pound. They met with a chef, collecting notes along the way. They read books on lobsters and the ocean habitat. They refined their writing skills and developed rich vocabulary as they produced many drafts. Their learning was embedded in the creation of an authentic product for a famous restaurant.

The Erie Canal

Many students in the city of Rochester, New York, study history through an important local landmark, the Erie Canal. The original canal flowed through the city until 1920, when it was converted to a subway system that ran until 1956. Now it is a dilapidated corridor that the state has proposed to fill in with concrete.

Students in Shannon Hillman's and Kate Daniels's 6th grade class at the Genesee Community Charter School learned about an alternative plan to revitalize downtown Rochester by recreating the canal. They embarked on a yearlong expedition investigating the pros and cons of the proposal.

Guided by the New York State social studies standards, they began their expedition by developing an understanding of the historical roles and significance of canals, which enabled early cities to rise in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, Rome, and the Meso-American culture. They examined how the construction and uses of canals have changed over time and how canals have affected the economics and environment of the communities they serve. They studied the physics principles at work in locks, boats, and construction equipment.

To understand how cities make decisions about economic development, groups of students traveled to four cities in the United States and Canada where similar downtown waterways have been successful in revitalizing and preserving urban neighborhoods. To raise money for these trips, the students all completed a Red Cross babysitting training class and offered their services to families in the school. They also got a grant from a local bank to supplement funds in the school's fieldwork budget.

In Ottawa, Canada; Providence, Rhode Island; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; and San Antonio, Texas, students met with city planners, business owners, mayors, city engineers, economic development experts, city council members, and visitors' bureau representatives. They met with the architects of the waterway projects. They also interviewed tourists and residents. Students gathered data about steps in the planning process, financing municipal projects, economic outcomes, and the effect of revitalized waterways on residents, business owners, and visitors.

They prepared a formal report of their findings to present to Rochester's mayor, Robert J. Duffy, who agreed to squeeze them into his busy schedule at 7:30 a.m. because he had a city council meeting at 8:00. One by one, students approached the podium and presented different parts of the report. When they finished, the astonished mayor invited the class to repeat their presentation to the entire city council. The class also presented their research at a public town meeting and hosted a call-in talk show on a local radio station to elicit public comments and answer questions about the plan. In a subsequent meeting, the city council appropriated \$350,000 to do a feasibility study of the urban waterway plan.

Tuskegee Airmen

Students who attend Central Alternative High School in Dubuque, Iowa, have been unable to succeed in a traditional school setting. Dubuque social studies teacher John Adelman designed an expedition to teach students about World War II. He began by choosing a compelling topic—the story of the Tuskegee Airmen, the famous all-black air force squadron—which would act as a case study through which students would master curriculum

standards related to World War II.

Students in John's class weren't much interested in the Tuskegee Airmen until they discovered that one of the airmen, Bob Martin, had attended the same Dubuque elementary and middle school that some of them had, and had graduated from Dubuque High School in 1936. Students wrote Martin and several other surviving airmen, asking many questions to get their perspectives on the war and their part in it. They followed up with an invitation to the airmen to come to Dubuque to be guest speakers at a public seminar in which the students would teach the community what they had learned about the extraordinary achievement of these courageous Americans.

Students conducted research on the war and the Tuskegee Airmen. They practiced public speaking before going into the community to raise awareness of the squadron's remarkable story. They spoke at various community and civic organizations, did live radio interviews, and orchestrated newspaper coverage to raise public awareness and generate funds. They brought four of the Tuskegee Airmen to Dubuque, sponsored a public seminar attended by more than 900 people, and donated \$5,200 to support the Red Tail Project—an effort to restore a P-51C Mustang fighter, the same make and model the Tuskegee Airmen flew over southern Europe.

John collaborated with English teacher Tim Ebeling to help students turn the firsthand information they gained from the letters and questionnaires into a book. The students wanted to tell the whole Tuskegee story, including the disturbing similarities between Hitler's racial policies and the United States' racial practices at that time. Their book, *The Tuskegee Airmen: Victory at Home and Abroad*, includes 230 pages of original research and has sold more than 1,500 copies. William Holton, the historian of the Tuskegee Airmen Oral History Documentation Project, has entered the book and the interviews conducted by the students into the national database as a resource for historians. John noted,

An interesting parallel between the perceptions the military had of the airmen 50 years ago and the public's impression of alternative students today was not lost on student Drew Brashaw. Drew commented, "These guys had something to prove. The world didn't believe that black men could fly planes, let alone protect bombers. Sometimes it feels like we have something to prove, too, just because we go to Central. Some people think we're lazy, and won't ever make anything of ourselves."

Not after this expedition.

A World of Difference

These expeditions are not isolated examples of exceptional teachers and gifted students. Expeditionary Learning Schools Outward Bound works with 4,300 teachers and 45,000 students, many of whom are struggling to overcome racial and economic disadvantages. There is, of course, a wide spectrum of implementation as teachers like Laura learn how to design and manage expeditions, but there's one thing all our teachers have discovered: When student work culminates in a genuine product for an authentic audience, it makes a

world of difference in student engagement, learning, and achievement.

At Expeditionary Learning, we have a growing archive of more than 400 authentic products, including biographies of nursing home residents, field guides to neighborhood flora and fauna, water study presentations to city councils, portraits of recent refugees from war-torn countries, geological guides to regional landforms, theme-based calendars on everything from fitness to civil rights heroes, and alternative energy reports to school committees, to name a few. These products show what students can accomplish when we give them meaningful projects and the right support. When students work on curriculum standards in the context of producing a genuine product for an authentic audience, the result is enhanced achievement in content-area knowledge, literacy, craftsmanship, and character.

About Expeditionary Learning Schools

Expeditionary Learning Schools Outward Bound is a national nonprofit organization that works with schools to improve student achievement, build student character, enhance teacher practices, and instill a positive school culture. At the heart of this approach are learning expeditions: interdisciplinary units aligned with state and district standards that culminate in sophisticated products demonstrating student skill and understanding.

The Expeditionary Learning approach is experiential and project based, involving students in original research—with experts—to create high-quality products for audiences beyond the classroom. Third-party studies conducted by the Rand Corporation, the Academy for Educational Development, the American Institutes for Research, and the National Staff Development Council support the effectiveness of the Expeditionary Learning approach.

To learn more about the projects described here and others from Expeditionary Learning schools, visit the Expeditionary Learning Schools Outward Bound Web site at www.elschools.org.