

Teaching for a Living Democracy

PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IN THE
ENGLISH AND HISTORY CLASSROOM

JOSHUA BLOCK

Foreword by Carla Shalaby



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Reframing School Learning

We need an expanded vocabulary, adequate to both the daily joy and the daily sorrow of our public schools. And we are in desperate need of rich, detailed images of possibility.

—Mike Rose (2009)

In the hallway students occupied a section of the not-so-clean floor. They lay sprawled on their stomachs, facing three laptops, legs angled in different directions. “We’ve got a really good idea,” Liza offered as she saw me approaching. “We want to teach them about Columbus Day.”

“Can that work?” asked Jules. “They’ve probably never *really* thought about it before.”

Outside the classroom and in the room at tables, on the floor, and in a clump near the windowsill, student groups from a 12th-grade English class were huddled together, some eagerly sharing ideas and some tentatively investigating possibilities as they planned lessons to teach to a 6th-grade class at a nearby elementary school. The 12th-graders had spent several weeks interrogating different meanings, understandings, and experiences of literacy. They had heard the 6th-grade teacher’s description of his students and topics that class had been studying. Now they were tasked with designing literacy-based lessons for this group of younger students. The stakes felt high. I had made it clear that no one would be approved to teach until their group showed me a completed, thoughtfully developed lesson plan based on the template I gave them (see Appendix, section B).

The scene reflected different experiences of young people engaged in real-world work. Some groups were actively researching and planning, working together to develop ideas they all agreed upon. They could be heard proposing plans, continually reassessing ideas, and searching for resources. Other groups were devising lessons that didn’t yet meet

criteria for the assignment or for success at the elementary school. Still others were having a hard time identifying and agreeing on lesson goals and needed the facilitation and encouragement of a teacher to nudge them forward.

Underneath the chaos was the undeniable power of young people engaging in work that has meaning. There was no talk about grades and little avoidance of the work. Instead, groups were remembering what they were like as 6th graders as they strategized different ways to engage 11-year-olds. Liza's group, focusing on cultural literacy, had discovered a video that asked the viewers to reconsider Columbus Day and were debating different ways to ask 6th-graders to reflect on the holiday and to consider the alternative celebration of Indigenous People's Day. Audrey, Aaron, and Donesha were deciding how to use their lesson to raise the idea of gender as a social construct. The classroom and the hallway were filled with a chorus of student voices alternating among discovery, debate, frustration, and excitement.

The background for this moment was the work I had done to prepare students to design lessons and work independently on projects for public audiences. Students knew that the work of the class prioritized their ideas and that the responsibility of developing quality products fell on them. They also knew that I was available to offer support and that we shared a vision of successful lessons and engaged intellectual experiences.

Earlier in the week I had modeled a lesson for the class based on the planning framework they were using. We analyzed the lesson and my design choices together. I made my thinking about my own planning process clear to them, so they could understand how I translate objectives and content into a lesson format. Then the class generated a list of goals and things to avoid for the project. Students also had a list of potential lesson topics, initially generated by me and supplemented with ideas brainstormed by the class. In addition, students had access to a collection of resource links I had compiled and shared.

I continually checked in with different groups and nudged them forward in the process. Even when students didn't realize I was listening, I was tuned in to what was happening within the groups, observing interpersonal dynamics and paying attention to the content they were developing. Prepared with a framework, careful prompting, and opportunities to collaborate, the students did the intellectual work of transforming their ideas into a purposeful sequence of activities for 6th-graders.