

Abstract

This study explores the ways inclusive pedagogy and meaningful, authentic learning affect student mindset, self-efficacy, and a sense of belonging in a Media Arts course at a community college. There has been much research directed at student achievement, while less has been devoted to exploring shifts in pedagogy or focused on the methods of the educator. This investigation leads to a fundamental question central to supporting student success: *Will a pedagogy shift towards meaningful authentic learning help move learners towards growth mindset, self-efficacy and a sense of belonging?* Whereas students had been asked previously to work with an established fairy tale, participating students were encouraged to either create their own stories, or to personalize a story with which they were familiar. They were given pre- and post-surveys measuring growth mindset, self-efficacy and a sense of belonging to determine any positive shifts in self-perception. Additionally, self-reflections by both the researcher (instructor) and the learners provided qualitative material to support any perceived changes. Follow-up interviews confirmed that, at least for this small sample, authentic learning and personalization positively impacted the interrelated areas of growth mindset, self-efficacy and a sense of belonging.

Mixed Methodology

Formative and Summative Surveys with Likert scales measuring *Sense of Belonging, Growth Mindset and Self-Efficacy*, as well as short answer questions.

Use of student self-reflection, work-in-progress and critique project sharing, instructor self-reflection.

Post-course interviews with participating students.

Problem/ Opportunity

In my Media Arts course students use a fairy tale to create "common ground" as a starting point for them to explore the various assigned projects throughout the semester. My original idea of using a fairy tale was to have a familiar foundation upon which exploring creativity within that structure could more easily be accessed. It became clear that some students were straining to mimic the formal language and approach of the Euro-centric stories. Realizing that Euro-centric storytelling (fairy tales) may not be familiar to students who grew up outside of Euro-centric culture, I made a change in the assignment that encouraged all students to either personalize a chosen story or to use their own story as a foundation for their projects. Because of this personalization, students no longer tried to mimic the way that the story was told, but rather explored their own meaningful life experiences through their story. Offering to each student the opportunity to start with their own story, rather than an established fairy tale, allows for a step closer to an authentic approach which might help them to feel more engaged with their projects.

Results

- Personalization improves results by engaging and motivating the participants.
- Authentic learning supports perceived ability to succeed, improving self-confidence.
- Small courses support a sense of belonging.
- Personalization evolves learning and personal expectations.

Discussion

Meaningful work was the key to success for the student participants.

It increased self-confidence and gave students motivation to take on unfamiliar tasks, while reducing their anxiety. At the outset, they were made to feel that their stories mattered.

A classroom environment that felt safe, helped students receive constructive feedback, as well as helping them to be who they are rather than contort themselves to perceived class expectations.

A sense of belonging helped students feel comfortable sharing more deeply about themselves and more attached to their projects. This was encouraged by small class size and work-in-progress sharing.

The small course size had an impact on students, allowing them to connect and increase feelings of belonging.

Personalization positively impacted the students' ability to complete a challenging curriculum, while encouraging ownership of their own academic expectations.

These heightened expectations for their academic futures are an attribute of growth mindset.

Student Response

100% Yes!

It was imperative. If I had not had that, the whole course would have been different for me.

Because it was related to me, I had a lot to work on, and so I got excited... Like the whole vision in my head, I knew everything!

It was the connection to the material that made me feel - it's worth learning this stuff!

I felt really connected to the project because I had the passion on that side of it, it made the project flow.

Once I started talking to other people and watching everybody's work... and I see that we are all learning together...

I felt safe... I think the biggest thing was the small number, the more intimate.... When another student and I met to talk about the assignment, just that connection with her alone really helped.

It definitely changed how I work and how I get through assignments. Just having that connection to it and enjoying it reminded me that you can put more of yourself in your art.

It gave me the confidence to do it. It gave me the confidence to put myself on display.

Reflection

In undertaking this study, my original motivation was to determine if a shift in pedagogical approach towards personalization might produce an environment in which a student might feel a greater sense of authenticity, or permission to be themselves. This stemmed from experiences with students where I saw them contorting themselves to fit into the curriculum. Even though my instructions gave them permission to personalize the material, they had so little experience doing so, that they were often limited by their own perceptions of what they believed was expected of them; how they thought they should perform. I saw this as a barrier to learning. They might be able to go through the hoops of the course criteria, however what did they learn in the process? Did they learn anything about themselves that might affect their ability to unlock learning in the future? Although many of my students eventually did get to a place where they could personalize their projects, I wanted to find a way to jump start them into the process sooner.

The results of this study unequivocally demonstrate that focusing on authentic, meaningful learning will open the door for students who might be blocked by preconceived notions of their own ability to succeed. In allowing students full access to make their assignments meaningful, they may access something in themselves, transform their own expectations. This is powerful because it challenges me to review my own approach to curricula. Where and when and how can I give students agency to make decisions about their own education, to decide what is important to them, and therefore, learn at a deeper, more satisfying level? How might this heightened sense of agency spill over into their overall relationship to learning?

Impacts on Teaching & Learning: Another major take away was understanding how much is learned about the teaching process through self-reflection (and how seldom we give ourselves time to reflect). Additionally, how important it is to reflect with our students. Having the opportunity to sit down with participants to talk through their experiences, was affirming and moving for me. It gave me the opportunity to evaluate whether my methodology was successful, as well as to listen to my students and to learn from them. In better understanding their experiences, I can extend that knowledge to future students and better learn how to follow their lead.



The Triumph of Red, Courtesy Kate Cornick, 2021

Question

Will a pedagogy shift towards meaningful, authentic learning help move learners towards growth mindset, self-efficacy and a sense of belonging?

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My Life is an Unfairytale, Courtesy Tamires Peres dos Santos, 2021