

Projects and Activities

A Means — Not An End

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A lesson on exploring world cultures, in a recent issue of a social studies magazine, provides instructions for making multi-coloured beads from strips of magazine paper, cut into triangle pieces. This is intended to address the theme of “time, continuity and change,” and is meant to be a discovery project for “beads around the world.”

This is a “hands-on” project. The students probably passed their time in class enjoyably and had something to take home to show their parents. But how did the activities help students learn about history, and what did the students know when they finished?

Pressure for more and more activities has grown intense. Some textbooks, anxious not to be behind the curve, can't seem to cram their pages with enough of them. And in some schools, God help the teacher whose students aren't up and about and “doing” something.

Underlying the popularity of hands-on activities and projects is the idea that the knowledge we acquire on our own is better than the knowledge we get from others. A full discussion of this idea — sometimes called “discovery learning” — is beyond the scope of this short essay, but I do want to note two cautionary points made by E.D. Hirsch, Jr. in his recent book *The Schools We Need*.

“...Discovery learning is an effective method — when it works. But there are two serious drawbacks to preponderant or exclusive reliance on discovery learning. First, students do not always make on their own the discoveries they are supposed to make; in fact, they sometimes make ‘discoveries’ that aren't true. Hence, it is essential to probe whether the desired learning goal has been achieved and, if

not, to reach the goal by direct means. Second, discovery learning has proved to be very inefficient. Not only do students sometimes fail to gain the knowledge and know-how they are supposed to gain, but they do not gain it very fast. Research into teaching methods has consistently shown that discovery learning is the least effective method of instruction in the teacher's repertory.”

Most recently, the push for “hands-on” activities has acquired new life from the largely non-critical acceptance of theories regarding “learning styles.” The rush to honour “tactile” or “bodily-kinesthetic” learning can lead to a general disparagement of verbal learning. Hirsch comments:

“Caution is especially required when the phrase ‘hands-on’ is used to imply disdainfully that visual and verbal learning is artificial and unengaging. Antiverbal prejudices spell disaster for disadvantaged students, who have not been exposed to a breadth of verbal learning outside the school...”

Certainly, hands-on projects have their place in the curriculum. I am not suggesting their elimination, only that we not be pressured into having a “hands-on” component to a lesson when there are better ways to get to where we want to go and that when we do choose to include one, we think carefully about what it is we hope to accomplish.

Here are three questions we as teachers should ask ourselves when planning an activity.

What is it that I want students to know?

If the purpose of the lesson is to learn more about the Cherokee Indians, then make sure your activity deals with the Cherokees, not with a newspaper about classroom events. That would be a fine project for a journalism class, but not for a history class. And what is it about the Cherokees that you want

students to know? The activity should relate directly to the standard or objective for the lesson. In fact, the standard should drive the direction of the activity. Clearly explaining what you want students to know provides added benefits when talking with parents, policy-makers and the public as well.

Does the activity touch only superficial aspects of the topic?

The mass media have so conditioned kids to having everything presented as entertainment that we sometimes fear that our students will find subjects interesting only if we make them “fun.” But *interesting* is not the same as *fun* and, when given the opportunity, students often find that serious subject matter is the most engaging of all.

Is this the best use of our limited classroom time?

Making a mobile or diorama to illustrate the main concept of a passage is certainly very hands on, but it may be a very inefficient means to an end. Likewise, a shoebox made to resemble the interior of a Japanese home may consume more valuable time than we can afford — time that could be more productively used to explore the fascinating topic of Japanese architecture and design.

None of my comments should be interpreted to discourage variety or spice in lesson planning. In my own field of history, for example, activities such as role playing, debates, the creation of timelines and maps, visits from local experts, well-planned field trips, the generous use of original documents, letters, photographs and biographies, and a rich array of other options can each make its unique contribution. No activity, however, should be an end in and of itself, but a path or a tool in the labour of genuine learning.

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