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Engaging Rural-Urban Students in Creative Writing

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Abstract

This article presents a narrative analysis of one high school teacher's project-based learning unit to connect creative writing, art, and business skills within a basic skills class for test preparation. Teachers have a choice concerning the philosophical lens they bring to their curriculum. Exercising that choice with intellectual integrity and authentic engagement can transform classrooms and education.

Introduction

Urban-rural, black-white, culturally sensitive teaching — those are terms used to speak about the setting where a white faculty teaches an African American student body. Jill is a white, female teacher in her eighth year teaching in a school where 85 percent of the students are African American and only three faculty members in core content courses are African American. The school is referred to as urban, but she and Glenda see cornfields as they approach the school. When Glenda was a child, there were clear boundaries between urban and rural, and urban meant inside the city limits while rural meant outside the city and in the country.

The school where this project takes placed was originally built in the 1960s as a white rural school to serve the families of a major farming equipment industry in our community. The industry was eventually closed, the community experienced white flight, and today the school is made up of primarily African American students and recent Burmese immigrants. Although addressing the complex issues of resegregation and redefining vocabulary in terms of ethnicity rather than geographical locations is beyond the scope of this project, we wanted to contextualize the project within the broader educational issues that serve as lenses to question the dynamics of a white, female teacher building a learning project around one of her hobbies to engage her African American students in writing and leadership development.

Jill's Voice: The Context of Practice

One of my favorite hobbies is scrapbooking, and I especially like making greeting cards. About six years ago, I began to wonder if my students could benefit from this hobby, and if I could somehow turn it into an interesting writing assignment. I was further encouraged to explore this idea when attending a summer class led by the Appleseed Writing Project (AWP), an affiliate of the National Writing Project. I already knew Glenda, my coauthor, before attending the AWP 2005 summer institute but became further acquainted with her in her role as codirector of the AWP.

The summer writing institute was framed by writers' workshop, teacher leadership, and narrative inquiry methods (Moss, Springer, & Dehr, 2008). It gave me a new lens for viewing my role as a writing teacher for students identified as unsuccessful on the state writing test. In keeping with the pattern of many schools in the area following the *No Child Left Behind* legislation, my school designed ISTEP (Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress) classes. Every state has an exam for systematically evaluating the performance of students. Texas has TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge & Skills); Indiana has ISTEP. I teach three classes made up of 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students who have not yet passed the writing part of the ISTEP test. But do not make the mistake of imagining that means my students are academically low. Some of my students are in Advanced Placement English classes as well. And again, an in-depth analysis of the complex dynamics that result in such scenarios is beyond this essay to present how I am able to bring in my hobby and allow it to create space for my predominately African American students to express their own cultural perspectives while learning about business and leadership within a project-based learning unit, which my district requires each teacher to design and teach during the school year. Before we will describe the specific focal project in this paper, we will explain more about project work in general. Terri, the third author, has taught undergraduate and graduate courses on designing and implementing projects for preschool and elementary children. In addition, she has partnered with one elementary school within Jill's district to create curriculum space for project work.

Terri's Voice: Defining Project-based Learning

Some school districts, such as the one in which Jill works, are beginning to incorporate project work as one aspect of their expected, standard practices. Katz and Chard (2000) suggest that is good practice because not all subjects can be taught using projects all of the time. Project work, or an in-depth investigation of a topic, is established on the theoretical foundation that children construct their own meaning of the world through their experiences with materials, people, and ideas (see, for example, Piaget, 1929, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978). Because knowledge construction takes time, project work usually involves students in planning and engaging in experiences that require several

days or weeks of sustained investigation (Katz & Chard, 2000). Unfortunately, many schools and teachers have compartmentalized subject areas in response to the push to incorporate state standards into teaching. Dewey (1900) argued that when teachers do not understand the relationship between educational psychology and teaching, they feel compelled "to resort to purely arbitrary measures, to fall back on mere routine traditions of school teaching…" (pp. 112–113) when faced with such dilemmas. Brooks (2004) elaborates on this sentiment when she states that education has replaced the natural processes of how children learn with artificial ones. As teachers seek different kinds of stimuli to attract and sustain children's attention to isolated skills and facts, instruction is reduced to an agreeable event that indulges children's love of excitement and pleasure, rather than their mind (Dewey, 1900). While we would never suggest that learning should be unpleasant, we do believe that it should be authentic, involve choices, and have intellectual integrity (Freeman & Swim, in press). It is our belief that these important aspects of learning are evident in project work.

Authentic

In early childhood, tasks that are authentic are ones that the learner considers necessary and significant because they motivate the child through a genuine need to know (Branscombe, Castle, Dorsey, Surbeck, & Taylor, 2003). Such motivation to learn may not always have a future or real-life application; it may just be important to accomplishing short-term goals. However, when discussing project work for older children and adolescents, Steinberg (1998) suggested that it should be connected to real life in order to be considered authentic. Students of this age are closer to engaging in adult tasks, so it is logical that they would see tasks that are more closely related to their perception of "adulthood" as more authentic. Lave and Wenger (1991) add to the discussion of authenticity the idea that the context must be considered; the learning should occur in settings or be used in applications that would normally involve that knowledge. These aspects of authenticity, as will be shown later, were considered when Jill designed the project.

Choices

While a topic for investigation can originate from a teacher or a student (Katz & Chard, 2000), learners should experience a variety of different choices throughout project work. Students can have instructionally relevant choices such as what questions to investigate, what role to take (e.g., discussion leader), whom to work with, where to work (e.g., at a table or individual desk), type of activities (e.g., creating prose or poem), or what to work on and when to work on it (e.g., research and then write poem). Turner and Strawhun (2007) discovered that asking each sixth-grade student to pose a question engaged a student who had openly expressed a dislike for mathematics in the past to participate in an over-

crowding project which required a great deal of math skills. While some instructionally irrelevant choices (e.g., using markers or colored pencils) may seem insignificant to the teacher, they have been found to significantly impact the learners' level of internal motivation (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008). Patall et al. (2008) hypothesized that this was due to these choices allowing for meaningful ways for individuals to express their identities. In any case, teachers should provide many opportunities for choices throughout project work as a tool for engaging and motivating learners.

Intellectual Integrity

The concept of intellectual integrity means that a curriculum has unity or coherence while simultaneously providing for important learning and skills (Freeman & Swim, in press). In this sense, pedagogy's integrity is relational rather than being dissected into the minute and isolated features of a lesson. For example, when teachers plan for subjects in isolation, barriers are built that obscure how the disciplines are interrelated (Freeman & Swim, in press). Project work naturally integrates curricular areas because the investigations are not bound by arbitrary content divisions. As stated above, children naturally view the world as a whole, seeing many connections at once and using knowledge from one subject area to inform another. For example, when kindergarten children were interested in pulleys, their science investigation expanded to involve writing as the children had to create plans for what materials they need to build their pulleys (Cross & Swim, 2006).

Drake (2001) suggests that when beginning a project, teachers should read all content standards to identify relevant ones, looking especially for standards that are broad-based or cross-disciplinary. In other words, standards should be the basis for project work because "An integrated curriculum enables students to see the big picture, to understand the topic's relevance and real-life context, and to engage in higher-order thinking skills" (Drake, 2001, p. 38).

Jill's Voice: The Project

When I learned about project-based learning that connects learning with real life (Steinberg, 1998), I understood that the topic for the project could originate with me or the students. I knew that I could create a project that would combine my scrapbooking hobby with project work. So I did. The result was a project that has captured the interest of many students over the past six years and has succeeded in teaching them some necessary skills for life. I originally called the unit the Greeting Card Project and changed it to Stampin' Up!™ for 2009 when I became a demonstrator for Stampin' Up!™.

The project consists of six major steps, all of which take place in roughly one 70-minute class period per step. Before these steps are taken, however, the teacher must decide how to organize students into smaller groups. I like to experiment, so I have

split groups up differently each year. I have let students choose their groups, I have split them up by gender, and I have also tried organizing them by ability levels. For me, it has worked best to split them up by gender but to also keep them as equal as possible when it comes to abilities. Once students are in their groups, they are given a project guide that I designed, and we read it together. Students follow along as I read aloud. Students choose job titles, and each group is given a huge manila folder, which includes all the directions and papers for the entire project. Groups choose a company name and write it, with their names and job titles, on the folder.

Day 1, Step 1

We begin step one by having a meeting with the CEO (the teacher) and the "discussion leaders" (design team bosses) from each group. It is the discussion leader's job to lead a discussion with their company (design team) about greeting cards in general. In our meeting, we read the Discussion Leader's Notes handout and discuss how discussion leaders (design team boss) will be graded by the CEO (teacher) and their employees (fellow students) on being an effective boss, and that they will have to grade their employees on how well they do as members of a design team. I have found that students love taking this responsibility and have even had some bosses fire or "promote" a few employees. When this happens, I meet with both students and discuss the decision. Discussion leaders then go back to their group and lead the discussion, as their employees fill in a dialogue synthesis journal, which will be explained in the next section of our essay by Glenda. At the end of the period, the CEO meets with the bosses again and asks questions about their employees, how well they think they did as a boss, problems, and successes. The CEO also takes this time to share her observations. Everything from the day is then placed in the companies' folders.

Day 2, Step 2

The second step, which takes place on the second day of the project, is to create a survey. Just like in the first step, the teacher-CEO first meets with the bosses of the day. In this meeting, we go over the surveyor's notes and answer questions. We also look at example surveys on the Internet. Before creating the survey, the bosses lead their companies in learning some vocabulary terms, such as "target market," "supply," "demand," and "universally specific." Then the boss has each employee write five questions from their category. Categories are listed on the worksheet. The simulated company team chooses a final 15 questions to put on their survey. Each student boss types up the design team's survey and distributes it amongst team members who have the weekend to find adults in the community to survey. But before they leave the room, the bosses meet with the CEO to share their final survey product, get it edited, and make copies. Students are

encouraged to visit places where cards are actually bought, but they can also choose to go door-to-door or make phone calls. Some students hang out at greeting card aisles in local stores to find greeting card consumers to survey. When they return to class, the next boss, the survey analyzer, is in charge.

Day 3, Step 3

It is the survey analyzer's job, on day three, to lead his/her group in tallying the results of each question in a systematic, scientific way. Of course, to start this step, bosses meet with the CEO to go over the Survey Analyzer's Notes and ask questions. After the statistics are created, the group writes a summary of what they learned from the public, and the bosses share their summary with the CEO. Many times, students find that some of the questions worked well, and some were more difficult to tally. The results of their survey are used to influence the companies' decisions with regard to step four: plan and design.

Day 3, Step 4

For step four, which can still take place on day three, bosses meet with the CEO to discuss Project Coordinator's Notes, Marketing and Design Strategy Worksheets, and Materials Order Forms. They are also instructed to watch a five-minute greeting card video CD on a computer and take a short quiz. This video discusses the term "universally specific" and explains what being a greeting card writer is like.

Student bosses take their employees through each step on their task description for the day, discussing as they go how to please Occasions (pseudonym of a company name) as well as the public. They take their employees on a guided tour around the room to look at all the materials available so they can better plan their designs. The plan and design boss is in charge of making sure the company employees have all the materials they need to make their cards, by giving the Materials Order Forms to the CEO. When they do this, the CEO discusses observations made during the period.

Day 4, School-University Instructional Partnership

It was my original goal to have a real greeting card employee come to speak to the students on day four. However, since I couldn't find any volunteers, I asked Glenda, a professor at IPFW (Indiana University–Purdue University Fort Wayne [Indiana]), to simulate the role of professional development for each simulated company employee. As mentioned before, I have had a professional relationship with Glenda for the past seven years, including when she provided an in-service presentation to me and my school colleagues on how to lead a class dialogue to engage all students in authentic participation. I asked her to act as a greeting card company executive, lead a dialogue with my students about how to communicate with each other as members of a company

design team, and lead a second dialogue about what Occasions is looking for in a card writer. There are no student bosses on day four when students engage in company-sponsored professional development.

Day 5, School-Community Instructional Partnership

On day five, students plan their cards, based on market strategies, surveys, greeting card CD-video, and personal choice. This "rough draft" on folded standard copy paper must include any poetry or prose that will be included in the card, pictures the students will draw, and color choices. This allows students to visualize the card, revise their ideas, and proofread for usage before using expensive materials to publish their final product. At this point, I invite in a local artist to share tips and techniques with my students. Susan Beasley, an art major at a local college served as a guest artist for the first two years of the project, helping my students with color coordination, spatial design, layouts, and the use of art tools. When Susan moved to Texas, Julie Boyd began helping with the artistic aspect. Her background includes teaching scrapbooking and photography at local craft stores. While these are important skills to focus on, I continue to seek a poet to work with the students. As an English teacher, I believe that I should focus on promoting writing in different genres, and in this case, mastering the skill of being "universally specific." In an effort to help students write something "universally specific," I quote Henry Gregor Felsen from a poster in my classroom: "Writing is figuring out what is on everyone's mind, then saying it for them." However, I also told my students that it is good to have a target market in mind.

Even without professional help, my students have created poems that are "universally specific" and personally relevant at the same time. For example, one student made a card for incarcerated fathers, with building blocks on the outside. The poem on the inside read,

> Ever since my adolescence,
> You couldn't be in my presence.
> I know you love me,
> But you couldn't show it.
> So now I am eagerly
> BUILDING TO THE MOMENT!

Another student created a card that someone would give a stepmother, foster mother, or other mother-figure. She wrote the following prose: "Thank you for being there for me. Every time I think of mothers, I think of you and no other." One young man wrote the following Valentine's Day card poem for a special girl in his life:

> If you be my valentine, I will show you love,
> way better than the stars above.

> My love will show you I'm kind,
> 'cause girl you know you so fine.
> So, can your heart be mine?

Another boy wrote a card congratulating Barack Obama, and even though the assignment was to create a universally specific greeting card, I thought that this showed Obama's impact on African American students. Perhaps African American students will become more interested in American politics because of such a great influence.

Day 6, Final Design

Students actually make the final cards on the sixth day. For the first five years, I packed up my hobby materials and provided everything students needed to create their cards. It was during the fifth year that I received an e-mail from my principal that made me aware of a Project-Based Learning (PBL) grant opportunity. I completed the application and received funding ($2,560) to cover materials and stipends for guest speakers. I calculated the materials for five years would be $1,560 and the rest of the monies could be used for guest speakers, who would receive a $100 stipend for each day spent in my classroom.

After students have created their cards, they fill out a notecard with their full contact information, description of card, target buyer and receiver, occasion, projected cost per card, and suggested asking price. Students understand this information will be valuable, should Occasions choose to use their idea. Cards using Stampin' Up!™ products will be sent to Stampin' Up!™. Then, I have students fill out an authentic job application to a greeting card company. The students can keep the application or return it on their own.

I actually submit the final products to real greeting card companies for students who want the opportunity to experience this process. It is my goal for students to actually receive feedback from a greeting card company, but this has not happened. I continue the process because students actively participate in the creative writing project and will be able to use their collaborative learning experiences in any future career. Students improve communication, writing, speaking, managing, surveying, and reading/vocabulary skills with this fun and exciting project.

Glenda's Voice: Bridging School and University through Narrative Inquiry

It has been six years since Jill first implemented a creative writing unit in her ISTEP classes as a way to actively engage her students in learning. She developed this project work around her personal hobby of creating greeting cards. I became involved in the process during spring semester 2007. My involvement was contextualized by my ongoing role as a professional development provider as part of a school and university partnership required by a grant proposal the principal had successfully written during the year before I joined the faculty at IPFW in 2001. When the university consultant for the English

department decided she did not want to continue with the project, I was asked to serve as the "technical assistant."

It was on January 3, 2007, that I met with the English teachers at the school under study during their scheduled collaboration time. I engaged the teachers in a dialogue about dialogue and left them with a copy of *Dialogue: The Power of Collective Thinking* by William Isaacs (1993). The professional workshop on dialogue was intended to give the teachers an opportunity to experience a way of implementing dialogue in teaching by participating in a hands-on experience. Instead of presenting dialogue in teaching through traditional lecture, I conducted a dialogue on dialogue. I also introduced teachers to a graphic organizer called a "synthesis journal." Following the professional development session during collaboration time, we set up a schedule for me to meet with each of the teachers to continue the dialogue about the potential for dialogue in her or his teaching. For homework, the teachers were to read *Dialogue: The Power of Collective Thinking* and be prepared to express their thoughts concerning the article, the hands-on professional development experience, and the potential of using dialogue to engage their students in active learning.

I met with Jill on Monday, January 8, 2007. Jill described her classes and discussed how she might use the synthesis journal in her greeting card project. I was familiar with this project because I observed her doing this project in 2006 after she attended the Appleseed Writing Project 2005 Summer Institute. After some discussion, we decided that I would become an active participant in the Greeting Card Project and engage the students in professional development concerning the use of dialogue in their collaborative work to design new greeting cards. We also decided that I would come on a second day to engage the students in a critical dialogue concerning ISTEP testing and its impact on their educational progress.

I attended all four of Jill's classes on January 22, 2007. I introduced myself to the students as an employee of the Occasions Corporation. I told the students that I understood they were in the process of designing new greeting cards for our company and that the home office had sent me to professionally develop their dialogue skills since this would be an important skill as they work collaboratively to generate creative ideas and designs. I proceeded to engage the students in a dialogue about dialogue. Students each wrote what they thought dialogue was and then contributed their ideas to the dialogue about dialogue. Throughout the four classes, students contributed ideas such as communication with the purpose of getting something done, listening, talk-listen-think-talk back, conversation, speaking to another person in direct conversation, speaking and talking in conversation, words in a play, imagination, read and respond in a group, pieces of information about what you have to do, taking in a group, conversation between people in which there is no right or wrong answer, people give opinions, discuss opinions with each other, opinions, how you think, what you feel, and telling how you feel about something.

After establishing this base knowledge or understanding about what it means to dialogue, students moved into their assigned work groups and roles for designing greeting cards. One student was the leader and engaged the rest of the students in a dialogue about what a greeting card is and does. Students began by writing their own ideas and then contributed to the group dialogue, listening to each other's ideas. It was very rewarding to see students advance so quickly in their ability to transfer the hands-on experience with learning dialogue to actually conducting a dialogue to generate creative ideas to design new greeting cards.

Although that was my final work as a technical assistant within the grant funding, I told Jill that I would be glad to return each spring to participate in her greeting card project. I returned in 2008 to participate and to encourage Jill in the process of writing a small grant to help her pay for all the materials that she had been funding out of her own pocket. Her small grant was funded for five years beginning in January 2009. I had also suggested to Jill that we use narrative analysis methods (Polkinghorne, 2005) to give her an opportunity to develop her professional writing skills and publish her project so that other teachers will consider the ways they can use project work to engage with their students in creative writing activities and leadership development.

Following the implementation of the greeting card project in January 2009, I worked with Jill to complete an IRB proposal for exempt status to use all of the data that Jill and I had collected during the process of conducting the Occasions and Stampin' Up!™ projects and dialogue sessions. Like most teachers, we had files with field data concerning curriculum and instruction that could easily be restructured into narrative texts for analysis. This process gave Jill an opportunity to develop narrative inquiry skills and professional writing skills, and model authentic writing to her students. In this way students could see their teacher as a learner and writer just as they were learners and writers.

Significantly, this study demonstrates the possibility of creating an educational context that connects research and practice for both the teacher and the learners. In this project, bridges were built between the urban-rural school and the university, the classroom teacher and the university teacher, the high school students and their teacher, the high school students and the university teacher, among the students, and between theory and practice. Expecting the students to talk to generate greeting card ideas and to develop leadership skills moves classrooms away from more conventional classroom practices where talking has been seen as nonproductive and against the rules to more progressive practices where democracy is promoted.

Terri's Voice — Analysis of Project Structure

It is evident that Jill is committed to this project because of how it engages the learners. In this section, I will analyze each of the three aspects of project work discussed previously, authenticity, choice, and intellectual integrity, in regards to the greeting card project.

Engaging Rural-Urban Students in Creative Writing

There were many authentic tasks imbedded in this project. For example, students had to select roles and assume the accompanying responsibilities within a business organization. Thus, they had specific duties to carry out as well as had to make decisions that impacted the overall functioning of the organization. In addition, the students had to create greeting cards that met the predetermined criteria of "universally specific." As such, this project work represented real work that adults do in the business community from creating a company to submitting a final product for evaluation.

The students were provided with instructionally relevant and irrelevant choices. Regarding the instructionally relevant choices, they were able to choose the topic of their greeting card, how they wanted to communicate their message (e.g., poem or prose), and how they designed their card. These are important aspects of choice that encourage the students to take ownership of their learning. In addition, the instructionally irrelevant choices (what materials to use to design the card), further engaged the learners in the project as they were able to personalize the card.

This project is an example of intellectual integrity because it demonstrates a meaningful integration of the Indiana Academic Standards in the project. Jill's greeting card project focused specifically on the following:

- writing (Standards 9.5 – demonstrating an awareness of the audience and purpose for writing);

- speaking (Standards 9.7.15 and 9.7.18 – developing and presenting expository and persuasive arguments, respectively);

- mathematics (Probability and Statistics, Standard 1 – gathering and displaying data, and using measures of central tendency and variability);

- business (Business Technology Lab, Standard 5.1 – using critical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving techniques to promote sound, effective business decisions; Technology/Business Communication, Standard 3.1 – reading and analyzing for content, interpretation, and inference; Standard 4.1 – planning and writing documents that are appropriate for the situation, purpose, and audience); and

- fine arts (Standard H.8 – Integrated Studies: Experience the integrative nature of visual arts, other arts disciplines, and disciplines outside the arts, and understand the arts as a critical component of learning and comprehension in all subject areas).

My analysis can only state that these standards were addressed through the curriculum. We would need assessment data on each student to evaluate how well the standards were actually met by individuals and as a group.

While the project work demonstrates intellectual integrity through curriculum integration, I would like to suggest that Jill, and other teachers in her situation, consider two additional points. First, I would like to see more inquiry built into the project. By that I mean I would like Jill to give the students more ownership in how the project work is defined. Students who are able to ask and answer some of their own questions tend to be more engaged in the process (e.g., Turner & Strawhun, 2007). I could see the project work do this by incorporating more dialogue, as described by Glenda. This project could easily begin with a dialogue about what they know about greeting cards. If they discuss, for example, that the purpose of a card is to tell someone how you feel when a specific situation arises, then they already have an informal definition of the term "universally specific." This might eliminate the need to direct some of their work and rather open space for asking other questions that would spark the students to make decisions about how to refine their understanding of that concept for the greeting card industry. Well-placed, open-ended questions can create disequilibrium and provoke an internal motivation to learn (White, Swim, Freeman, & Norton-Smith, 2007) and bring to life the true purpose of an education that is "learning to learn" (Rickey & Moss, 2004, p. 113). In this way, instructional time could be more focused when teachers better understand the students' prior knowledge. In addition, the dialogue could open the door for discussing other means of expressing feelings. Greeting card stores are now full of plaques and paving stones with messages on them. Maybe a student would want to express her idea on a card as well as a more permanent reminder.

Allowing the students more ownership in the project is also related to my next suggestion for change. I have argued elsewhere (Freeman & Swim, in press) that when a project is repeated three or more times with different groups of children, it loses some of the important characteristics of a project and becomes a teaching activity or ritual. When that occurs, the risk of students going through the motions to complete assigned tasks becomes higher because they are completing a series of tasks that may or may not be connected in their minds. The more each project is tailored to the learners within the group, the more engaged in learning they will be. Jill argues later in the paper that attendance is a problem in her school and that she and her students noticed that it continued to be a problem when carrying out this project. That is one hint to me that she needs to find ways to maintain her goals and basic structure but open the project up more so that the learners can engage personally with the project.

As a final reflection, I would like to commend Jill for taking on a project of this magnitude. She is clearly committed to the learning of her students and discovered that sharing a passion of hers positively impacted the learning and the learning environment for her students.

Jill's Voice – Scholar-Practitioner Analysis of Project Outcomes

During the third year of the project work, I decided to have students evaluate themselves, their group members, their teacher, and their guest speakers. However, I had never analyzed the data for patterns or implications for practice. After the completion of the project this year, I decided to take a closer look at those evaluations to find out what I could do to improve the project work. The following tables and quotes from students were extremely helpful in evaluating my own practice.

Students' Rating of Themselves and Their Groups

When students were asked if they enjoyed being a leader, they were very positive. Table 1 shows that 20 of 21 students reported that they somewhat or better (yes) enjoyed being a leader. Their comments, which supported this positive experience, included, "I enjoyed it because I was in charge," "I enjoyed it and put my all into it," and "I enjoyed it because I got to be mean and usually I'm not." I was happy to see that zero students said they did not like being in charge. That, I believe, is a good indication of their confidence and aptitude for leadership capabilities!

Table 1. Students who enjoyed their leadership role

Yes	Somewhat	No	No Answer
17/21 = 81%	3/21 = 14%	0/21 = 0%	1/21 = 5%

Next, I asked students if they thought they were good leaders. One girl said, "I think I did a good job because I watched my attitude and explained things well." Another wrote, "I made sure everybody was doing what they were suppose to." Another student indicated that he got the work done and kept his team focused on the tasks at hand. I never told the students what qualities I thought made a good leader, but obviously I didn't have to!

Table 2. Students who thought they did a good job being a leader

Yes	Somewhat	No	No Answer
13/21 = 62%	1/21 = 5%	0/21 = 0%	7/21 = 33%

I thought it would be of further interest to note areas where students thought they made the best contributions to their groups. However, a large percentage of students did not answer the question. The reasons for this lack of response are unclear to me. However, it might be that students are not comfortable with discussing their strengths for fear that someone might think they are bragging or conceited. One interesting response to this question described the student's leadership abilities: "…I kept my group in check. I made them participate and come up with their ideas."

In contrast, when asked about areas that they needed to improve, 21 of 27 (73 percent) students responded. The top items they wanted improve were their ability to lead discussions, their attitude, and working harder (see Table 3). Of the students surveyed, 9.5 percent stated they wanted to improve their leadership skills. Qualitative responses support this area for improvement. One student said he needed to be more bossy than friendly. A girl said she could have made the guys in her group give their opinions more. Another student said he could have let someone else help him more.

Table 3. Areas students thought they could improve

Leadership	No Answer	Discussions	Surveying	Attitude	Creativity	Working Hard
9.5%	24%	23.75%	0%	19%	9.5%	14.25%

Table 4 shows student responses when asked what areas their group members needed to improve upon. I was pleasantly surprised to see that students noticed that attendance is a problem. Typically, I have 75 percent of students attend the ISTEP classes, but I've seen the absence rate go as high as 40 percent. My school serves a very transient population. In addition, poor attendance is partly due to poor behavior, resulting in students in my ISTEP classes spending days and even weeks in ISR (in-school removal). This obviously hinders their education in general, but is also is troublesome to their group and completely blocks my ability to facilitate their learning in this project. Attendance is definitely something that needs improvement. Some student responses such as "staying on task" and "paying attention" were generalized into the category of "Working Hard" in the table below. Some other specific comments included "take control," "more involvement," "wasn't here enough," and "less talking." Almost all student responses fit into the following categories.

Table 4. Areas students thought their group members needed to improve

Leadership	No Answer	Discussions	Attendance	Attitude	Creativity	Working Hard
6%	6%	21%	18%	9%	6%	33%

Jill's Final Reflection

I believe wholeheartedly that what started out as a simple desire to share one of my passions with my students has become an extremely valuable learning experience that they will always remember. My students have been provided opportunities that motivate and challenge them both intellectually and creatively. I think I have even succeeded in increasing student understanding of the connection between school and life, which is often a difficult task. Students were able to develop and display their leadership, business, and creative talents to other students, their community, and the corporate world. The

project reflects three of the six A's of the project-based learning template: authenticity, applied learning, and adult connections (Steinberg, 1998).

In hindsight, there are a few things that I want to improve upon. First, I would like to find a way to obtain more student feedback at the completion of the project. The low number of responses, which could be associated with my attendance rate, is a limitation of this research. Missing data from almost a quarter of the class could call into question the results. I also have come to understand that I need to find a published poet to share his or her skills with my students. So I have asked a poet and friend of Glenda to help next year and he has agreed, despite being offered a lower fee than he is accustomed to. I may try to apply for another grant so that I can offer poets more compensation. The grant money I have received so far, though, has been a big plus in validating and facilitating the work we do in the classroom. This project has also highlighted for me the importance of community partners, the Ecolab Foundation, and guest speakers in the learning process.

Finally, my students' authentic participation made the project a success, but I know that it could be made even more authentic if the students could dialogue even before I introduce the project. I came to this realization because of Terri's suggestion, but my initial response was "I already have a dialogue on day four." Terri helped me realize, though, that it would be more authentic if the students were not aware of the project when the dialogue occurred. Then any questions that arise from that dialogue could be written down and answered through students' own authentic discovery using the materials I already have, such as the Hallmark CD or materials sought by the students. Thanks to Terri, I have resolved to try this new format next year. Overall, the project has been a great learning experience for my students — but maybe even more so for me! Collaborating with Glenda and Terri and reflecting on the work done by myself and my students has helped me to grow in my understanding of project-based learning so that I can continue to make this project even better.

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