



AUTHENTIC LEARNING: LITERATURE SPRINGBOARD 1:

# What is authentic learning?

(An extract from a commissioned review by Ken Nobin)

Authentic learning is generally described from one of two perspectives. The first, and the more easily operationalised, is the perspective of the teaching and learning activities that enable or promote authentic learning. The second is from the perspective of the relationship between the subject matter and the learner. This section begins with the latter perspective.

Authentic learning essentially encourages students to compare their personal interests with those of a working disciplinary community: “Can I see myself becoming a member of this culture? What would motivate me? What would concern me? How would I work with the people around me? How would I make a difference?”

Lombardi (2007a) emphasises the importance of higher order thinking and analysis that is afforded in authentic learning:

To be competitive in a global job market, today’s students must become comfortable with the complexities of ill-defined real-world problems. The greater their exposure to authentic interdisciplinary communities, the better prepared they will be “to deal with ambiguity” and put into practice the kind of “higher order analysis and complex communication” required of them as professionals. (p. 10)

This higher order thinking and analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of learning. Starratt (2004) maintains that this understanding is further enhanced by a relationship to the trajectory of students’ lives. Authentic learning is not only about their *taking and processing* new knowledge and skills for but is also about *giving* of their humanity to others and to the community. It involves making a difference in the lives of others.

Authentic learning engages students in deep and meaningful learning experiences, where teaching and learning processes are constantly constructed and reconstructed to respect the particular needs and circumstances of the learners, with a view to elevating and enhancing their life chances and choices. This is a fundamentally ethical activity, and in Catholic schools contributes to the dual moral purpose of authentic learning and evangelisation. It contributes to the development in each learner of:

- personal meaning through their learning (students must be able to connect their learning to the personal circumstances of their lives and gives them hope for a better future);
- greater awareness of relationships between themselves and the subject of study (acquisition of information, knowledge, skills must help them develop greater self belief and confidence);

- deeper respect for the integrity of the subject of study (the subject matter is *sacred* in that it equips them with tools for living a contributing and fulfilling life); and
- more fully as human beings (be transformed into fully functioning human beings – the aim is not just to know more but to be more).

(Duignan, 2010, adapted from Starratt, 2004)

Starratt (2004) also states that by connecting learners' search for meaning and purpose in their lives to a variety of personal connections to be found in the academic curriculum, authentic educators enable their students, as learners, to continuously transform (construct, deconstruct, reconstruct) their understanding of themselves and engages them positively and proactively with the challenges and possibilities of their lives. The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008) captured this type of thinking in its second goal: Education equips young people with the knowledge, understanding, skills and values to take advantage of opportunity and to face the challenges of this era with confidence. This document has provided the foundations on which the new Australian Curriculum is built. The current Australian Curriculum documentation describes the learning entitlement of students as a foundation for their future learning, growth and active participation in the Australian community. The general capabilities in that curriculum are described as playing a significant role in attaining this goal.

Establishing the conditions for authentic learning requires that the architects of curriculum, pedagogical processes and learning environments will need to place students, their needs and circumstances, at the heart of their efforts. Otherwise, students are likely to become disengaged and their learning becomes hollow, meaningless or, in Starratt's term, 'inauthentic'.

In order to build the types of learning environments that Sawyer (OECD 2008b) and Starratt (2004) are recommending, there is a need to create to a much greater degree than is currently the case in many 'standard schools' (OECD 2008a), more open and risk free learning contexts where students are able to openly 'think out loud', engage in stimulating dialogue, and receive constructive feedback on their learning. Sawyer (OECD, 2008b) sums up these ideas very well below:

. . . the best learning takes place where learners articulate their unformed and still developing understanding, and continue to articulate it throughout the process of learning. Articulating and learning go hand in hand, in a mutually reinforcing feedback loop. In many cases, learners do not actually learn something until they start to articulate it – in other words, while thinking out loud, they learn more rapidly and deeply than studying quietly. (p. 53)

Downes (2007) argues that authentic learning typically focuses on real-world, complex problems and their solutions, using role-playing exercises, problem-based activities, case studies, and participation in virtual learning communities. They are "not constructed in order to teach geometry or to teach philosophy. A learning environment is similar to some 'real world' application or discipline: managing a city, building a house, flying an airplane, setting a budget, solving a crime, for example." Going beyond content, providing for authentic learning

intentionally brings into play multiple disciplines, multiple perspectives, ways of working, habits of mind, and community.

Jenkins et al. (2006) in their research demonstrate that students immersed in authentic learning cultivate the kinds of “portable skills” that newcomers to any discipline have the most difficulty acquiring on their own:

- The judgment to distinguish reliable from unreliable information
- The patience to follow longer arguments
- The synthetic ability to recognize relevant patterns in unfamiliar contexts
- The flexibility to work across disciplinary and cultural boundaries to generate innovative solutions

Bennett, Harper and Hedberg (2001) usefully discuss the multiple interpretations that abound about authentic activities in the literature, ranging from activities based on real situations to models that focus on applying conceptual knowledge or skills, such as critical thinking or problem solving. Herrington and Oliver (2003) define authentic learning as experiences that incorporate a number of principles in their design. Learning experiences that incorporate these principles can be described as authentic in that they aim to enable the acquisition and demonstration of knowledge and skills within real settings and allow the learner to make connections between the school setting and the demands of their broader communities.

Educational researchers have found that students involved in authentic learning are motivated to persevere despite initial disorientation or frustration, as long as the exercise simulates what really counts—the social structure and culture that gives the discipline its meaning and relevance. (Herrington, Oliver & Reeves, 2010). The research on wellbeing points to the relationship working in the other direction as well, ie that students with a greater sense of wellbeing are more likely to be successful learners.

Recognising that authentic learning is an end, rather than a means, it is still useful to reflect on those activities which can help to provide opportunities for authentic learning. The research of Reeves, Herrington & Oliver, (2010) focused on defining critical characteristics of authentic activities based on a wide literature review of recent research and theory. In reflecting on the characteristics of activities described by researchers, they found ten broad design characteristics of authentic activities that have been identified. Teachers need to consider how these relate to one another and to the broadest appreciation of authentic learning.

- *Authentic activities have real world relevance:*  
Activities match as nearly as possible the real world tasks of professionals in practice rather than decontextualised or classroom based tasks.
- *Authentic activities may be ill-defined, requiring students to define the tasks and sub-tasks needed to complete the activity:*  
Problems inherent in the activities are ill-defined and open to multiple interpretations rather than easily solved by the application of existing algorithms. Learners must identify their own unique tasks and sub-tasks in order to complete the major task.
- *Authentic activities comprise complex tasks to be investigated by students over a sustained period of time:*

- Activities are completed in days, weeks and months rather than minutes or hours. They require significant investment of time and intellectual resources.
- *Authentic activities provide the opportunity for students to examine the task from different perspectives, using a variety of resources:*  
Such tasks afford learners the opportunity to examine the problem from a variety of theoretical and practical perspectives, rather than allowing a single perspective that learners must imitate to be successful. The use of a variety of resources rather than a limited number of pre-selected references requires students to detect relevant from irrelevant information.
  - *Authentic activities provide the opportunity to collaborate:*  
Collaboration is integral to the task, both within the course and the real world, rather than achievable by an individual learner.
  - *Authentic activities provide the opportunity to reflect:*  
Activities need to enable learners to make choices and reflect on their learning both individually and socially.
  - *Authentic activities can be integrated and applied across different subject areas and lead beyond domain specific outcomes:*  
Activities encourage interdisciplinary perspectives and enable students to play diverse roles thus building robust expertise rather than knowledge limited to a single well-defined field or domain.
  - *Authentic activities are seamlessly integrated with assessment:*  
Assessment of activities is seamlessly integrated with the major task in a manner that reflects real world assessment, rather than separate artificial assessment removed from the nature of the task.
  - *Authentic activities create polished outcomes valuable in their own right rather than as preparation for something else:*  
Activities culminate in the creation of a whole product rather than an exercise or sub-step in preparation for something else.
  - *Authentic activities allow competing solutions and diversity of outcome:*  
Activities allow a range and diversity of outcomes open to multiple solutions of an original nature, rather than a single correct response obtained by the application of rules and procedures.

It is often claimed that the structures of conventional schooling - timetables, architecture, assessment practices and the like - are not conducive to the kinds of activities that foster authentic learning.

Criticism continues to be levelled at schools for their inability to provide learners with the environments that learners of today require for particular types of learning. Findings in the literature include observations that school simply prepares children for school (Jonassen, 2003), that the school environment is too prescriptive (Gee, 2004), that it lacks relevance in learners' lives (Gee, 2004; Oblinger, 2005), that it exists to 'enforce control rather than enhance learning' (Nair & Gehling, 2008, p. 24) and that schools find it 'very difficult to realise that there are other literacies outside the classroom.' (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 8). Educators, in this view, will be required to consider where the boundaries of their responsibility for learning lie.

The implications of this situation are that any pursuit of authentic learning will require a consideration of the extent to which ingrained practices and long established structures might be forming unintended barriers to that learning.

## *Synthesis*

Learning which is authentic is significant in its own right, challenging, and engaging for the learner.

It embraces the knowledge, skills and attitudes which contribute to learners' journeys of making sense of their lives, the world in which they live and, in our Catholic schools, their relationship with Christ.

While drawing on the wisdom and traditions of academic disciplines, authentic learning is able to be applied in an integrated and critical way to real life situations.

The conditions in which such learning can take place will make connections with real world issues, will allow for a multiplicity of viewpoints, a tolerance of uncertainty and an appropriate balance between deep individual reflection and collaboration with other learners. Such conditions face obstacles in the context of traditional schooling.

### **References:**

All references can be located at the end of the complete literature review which can be found [here](#).