

Characteristics of authentic literacy instruction education essay



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Introduction

When children come into the world, they come with the innate desire to explore their surrounding and this is seen in their daily interaction with the environment around them when it involves language development and more. They actively participate in their learning of spoken and written language from their parents and other people interactions (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). They see print in the world through signs on shops, along the road and even the supermarket and begin to make associations when they explore printed material (i. e. paper and crayons, and story books). They develop their written experiences by trying out different things, experimenting and inventing their own literacies. As the activities begin to take on more meaning, they increase their knowledge of how written language is formed and how they function in the real world, depending on different situations (Goodman, 1986). As a result, the real world offers these children an entire environment that is literally rich with language experiences that the children can learn and produce in a natural setting. These settings will also involve human relationships that affect how children may or may not use the literacy tools they encounter (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Unlike the empty slate that some people believe children are born with, they are actually vital members of a dynamic system in which the environment influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

The more children use the resources available to them in the environment to expand on their knowledge and skills in relation to constructing more solid understanding of factors in the literary world, they are engaging in solving problems that utilizes cognitive skills and through their interaction with <https://assignbuster.com/characteristics-of-authentic-literacy-instruction-education-essay/>

members of their environment. Therefore, children's learning about literacy is integrally tied with practical action, resulting from their need to control, manipulate, and function in their environment. Without a doubt then, children cannot escape the realities of reading and writing, which are so much a part of their lives as there are so many relationships and contexts that are tied in with these realities (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Through participating in activities that require cognitive and communicative functions, children are drawn into the uses of these functions by their caregivers in ways that may nurture and develop them. Consequently, children's earliest conceptions of literacy and strategies for reading and writing are likely to be formed through activities that are often socially instigated (Bruner, 1972).

Therefore, the case for authenticity in literacy is a natural process. Authenticity refers to the real-life experiences an individual experiences when carrying out specific activities (Ableser, 2008). This involves life experiences that are naturally occurring in the lives of children and individuals. When a child argues with her parent on the merits of getting a dog, the points and arguments provided are a result of a natural and real reason for doing so. This authenticity is carried into the area of literacy in the classroom as the concept seems a logical progression of utilizing the innate curiosity and purpose of carrying out an activity as a part of the process of learning, into the classroom teacher's goal of getting her students to learn and do academic related activities. The authentic activities that individuals typically exercise in day-to-day situations are replicated in the classroom. Unfortunately the ordinary practices of the culture-what people do in daily,

weekly, and monthly cycles of activity do not seem academically sufficient to meet the educational standards set by the power that be. Such practices, for example, include shopping for the best bargain, figuring out the health hazards of microwaves or examining costs for a planned holiday are not translated adequately and therefore seem to be lacking in some way. Authentic literacy practices then seem to have failed in some way.

Authentic Literacy Defined

Yet, in spite of setback, the power of authenticity cannot be denied as when schools offer classrooms that are authentic-literacy-directed, its potential in offering learning experiences that are similar to how children learn in real life outside of the classroom is an exciting prospect (Newmann & Wehlage, 1993). When students learn through real-life tasks, students are working to create meaning from their experiences and these experiences allow students to make meaningful connections (Snowball, 1992).

Authentic literacy environments also require that students use communication in receiving and extending their learning experiences. Without communication, the development of authentic experiences will be hindered. Rhodes and Shanklin, (1993) call for authentic literacy experiences in the classroom, such as reading and writing, to hold the same communicative purposes as when students are outside of the classroom.

When Schmoker (2007) defined authentic literacy, he explained that students who learn to “read, write and think effectively” (p. 448) do so when they are given opportunities to engage in in-depth reading through higher-order questions that is later used to “argue and support an interpretation

from one or more texts” (p. 490) in their extended writing. The classroom discussions that are generated from both authentic reading and writing experiences are also authentic experiences. Purcell-Gates, Duke and Martineau (2007) added to this by specifically mentioning authentic reading materials such as those that involve written genres like novels, newspaper articles, memos, technical procedures and even greeting cards.

Characteristics of Authentic Literacy Instruction

What would authentic literacy instruction look like in the classroom? As mentioned previously, the level of authenticity can be influenced by the type of reading and writing materials that the teacher uses such as tradebooks instead of the traditional use of text books, which are heavily written for specific school-related goals. For students to experience authentic literacy encounters, there should be purposeful but also meaningful experiences where the literacy event is not the end goal of the activity but rather integrated into the real-life target purpose.

Authentic literacy resources include texts normally found within a child’s environment, such as trade books, bus schedules, maps, and diaries. People are also valued resources, as they can offer firsthand accounts and personal knowledge to the process of inquiry. When students have access to multiple resources, activities can become more authentic, students can more clearly communicate their message, and be more fully engaged in authentic literacy events (Wortman, 1993).

Rhodes and Shanklin (1993) suggest that a classroom that purports to be authentic should allow students to make choices and have a say in their

learning experiences. This choice empowers students in classroom interactions and decision-making actions (Wortman, 1993). Snowball (1992) shares this thought that when students are given a choice to plan, explore and share their ideas, there is more purpose to the activities.

In fact, Pachtman and Wilson (2006), in one of his studies highlights student choices in increasing motivation. Pachtman and Wilson (2006) emphasized on authentic reading and investigated students' opinions on what they found to be meaningful and engaging reading practices. Students who were offered greater choice and say in their learning experiences were more engaged and took responsibility for their learning due to their vested interest from the decision-making. Students preferred to make their own choice of the books they were going to read and the success of those authentic materials in motivating the students was a clear indication that teachers should take note that choice allows authenticity and teachers can make use of this information to plan their lessons (Pachtman and Wilson, 2006).

' Aside from books, authentic experiences are defined through " the individual's choice to create and share meaningful and purposeful text for a self-selected audience" (Wortman, 1993, p. 1). This would mean that in areas such as writing, students instead of carrying out the task of writing a letter to someone, whom the teacher had decided beforehand, students can make decisions on who their letters can be directed to.

A classroom that is focused on authentic literacy must be relevant to the lives of the students. As much as choice and the type of materials can help create an authentic literacy environment. Teachers and students have

curriculum demands put on them and if any authenticity is involved, it remains superficial. The teacher can meet the needs of the curriculum and remain authentic, even relevant to the students. For example, in a unit on wildlife, the teacher may create an activity where students research on specific leatherback turtles. This activity meets the requirements of the curriculum, however is still irrelevant to the students. To meet relevance in an authentic literacy classroom, the teacher could allow students to research on an animal that the students decide on their own which has relevance to their respective lives. Some students may want to research on penguins they saw at the zoo or the cheetah, someone has compared them with. The students will reference from multiple sources such as the Internet, magazines, and expert sources. The students will decide what they want to do with the information they have gathered, whether it is to write to someone in the government, produce a presentation to source for funds to fund a specific wildlife preservation fund or even come up with a wildlife newsletter to be shared with their classmates. This activity will meet the requirements of authentic resources, choice and relevance; and still meet curriculum demands.

Relevant activities allow students to work on skills in a genuine literacy event and helps students make connections between the curriculum and their lives outside of the curriculum. Students will be able to draw conclusions and extend knowledge through their exploration of authentic activities.

Authentic Literacy Instruction vs Explicit Literacy Instruction

There is clear indication that as children move up the education system the learning and literacy activities seem more focused on meeting standards and curriculum demands. With the addition of high-stakes testing, teachers seem to be pushed against the wall to ensure that the activities their students do in the classroom are more classroom-related instead of mirroring the social and contextual situations of the real world (Bruner, Olver, & Greenfield, 1966). Children begin their literacy journey in the formal world of education with typically learning concepts of print, decoding print and eventually figuring out meaning to aid comprehension of the uncountable texts students will face in their literacy-related classes. These classes, more often than not are conducted explicitly, are directed towards helping students gain literacy skills that will be beneficial to them in their later lives after school. These skills are taught so that students can master them and retrieve them when needed (Powell and Davidson, 2005). There is no denying the role of explicit instruction in students' learning. However, when teachers get caught in a cycle of explicit teaching, followed by continuous and repetitious assigning of worksheets, book reports and essays, students lose out on the richness of an authentic literacy approach.

Many teachers due to time constraints prefer to use a classroom literacy curriculum that tries to generally fit the needs of all the students in their respective classrooms. However, in reality we know that literacy classrooms are not made up of only one type of students. Teachers will not be able to meet individual students' and, diversity would be considered a disadvantage

instead of an advantage. Such classrooms do not reflect real-life needs and goals of the students and does an injustice to these students by not enabling them to bridge between their life goals to academic goals (Eckert & Bell, 2004).

Scribner and Cole (1973) also concur in their classic article comparing formal and informal instruction, such educational practices can do the opposite as these learning activities are so far removed from real-life learning situations and practices that students face a disconnect.

Many researchers like Schmoker (2007) believe that the best way to improve reading scores and improve students' literacy skills and strategies is by providing direct literacy instruction using authentic materials. He explained that the instruction should move away from meaningless drill-like activities but instead should be focused in getting students to read a variety of texts available in the real world that provide them fodder to explore their comprehension, hone and revise on their interpretation of text-content, as well as improve their arguments of the subject read (Schmoker, 2007; VanDeWeghe, 2008). This will help students have longer-lasting retention of knowledge learned. In fact, Powell and Davidson (2005) believe that authentic literacy can be equivalent to "situated literacy" where literacy is "embedded within real-world events [and] as a medium for genuine communication" (p. 249). The classroom that has literacy goals embedded within the classroom lesson plan can be brought about when a teacher gets her students to make connections between a particular topic and their own thoughts and beliefs. VanDeWeghe (2008) mention that students here are able to express their opinions, share it with their classmates and explore the <https://assignbuster.com/characteristics-of-authentic-literacy-instruction-education-essay/>

various interpretations in a social and personal context. These students are learning in an authentic literacy environment because their learning is directly connected to real-life situations and purposes.

However, Purcell-Gates et al. (2007) noticed that there can be no direct cause and effect seen from the use of direct instruction in an authentic environment unless further empirical studies come forth. There are too many unanswered questions of how students best learn language forms, its discourse and the related genres. After all, different students learn language differently. They bring into their learning experiences a host of other social and cultural experiences outside the classroom.

In spite of all the explicit instruction to various literacy goals, teachers are generally keen to provide more authentic literacy activities. They are progressively moving away from traditional methods and moving towards more authenticity such as when teachers include inquiry-based learning that allow students to investigate real-life problems. This method of learning allows the bridging of what students need to learn in the classroom and the validity of their real-world tasks. Authentic tasks take the form of projects and activities that allow students to reach outside of the classroom and form ties with the community at large. This is a far cry from the demands of the textbooks.

Why is authentic literacy important?

Authentic focusses on literacy activities that revolve around real-world tasks, applications and contexts. Therefore, it is able to introduce to students the idea that there is a purpose to learning. This purpose is not related to what

the textbooks or what standardized tests say they should learn but is purposeful learning that is relevant to the students' real lives.

Purcell-Gates et. al (2007) conducted a research project that revealed increased ability to understand comprehension of informational texts and write better when students were allowed to engage in authentic informational texts compared to those that were only offered classroom-based typed of texts and activities.

Authentic literacy activities can help students retain more of the information they learn as when students were offered authentic texts and writing tasks, there was more active participation and less frustration as students were able to evaluate and better discuss on material that had meaningful purpose and relevance to themselves. These students took care in getting as accurate the information they could get by going to various resources. There was clearly more meaningful learning taking place (Edelsky and Smith, 1984). When students are given a standard worksheet or task to complete, there is less engagement as students do not see how these activities are relevant to their lives (Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993).

Furthermore, authentic literacy allows students to develop higher order thinking skills that is sadly lacking as teacher try to meet the needs of struggling learners by simplifying real-life texts which then causes the authenticity to be lost (Allington, 2001). There is an acute need for students to be able to read and write materials that require them to evaluate and synthesize information from various sources. Students will not be able to do that if the materials they encounter in the classroom are not authentic and

have been simplified. Schmoker (2006) laments the lack of “substantive reading, writing and talking” (p. 54) which are available from authentic texts. Teachers instead of providing easier texts could instead look into getting students to familiarize themselves with authentic texts that have higher-order language so that they can work towards obtaining the language of the educated and not be penalized for the lack of it.

To Silvers, Shorey and Crafton (2010), authentic literacy is important as it takes into account student diversity by providing a safe environment for students to evaluate on their world views, question and find answers to the assumptions and beliefs they bring into the classroom and evolve or reinforce identities. Authentic literacy allows students to become empowered democratic citizens as they engage in real-life literacy and making meaning of their learning (Powell & Davidson, 2005).

What does Authentic literacy instruction look like?

Despite teacher reservations about implementing authentic literacy in the classroom, due to time, score accountability, data driven administrations and a heavily weighed content curriculum, authentic literacy is “doable”.

However, for authentic literacy to take place efficiently, teachers should consider the environment from which authentic literacy is to take place in.

Students need to feel a sense of security for them to be able to move beyond their comfort zone especially when they are asked by their teachers to take risks in the way they think and process thoughts and ideas. They must feel safe and know that they will be respected for their sharing and collaborating

between them and their teacher, and their peers (Powell, Diamond & Burchinal, 2010).

Students, especially from diverse backgrounds need to know that their cultural knowledge that they bring into the classroom is a valued asset in an authentic literacy classroom. They are allowed to be active participants in their learning and are expected to have differing opinions and reactions to interpreting content, materials and activities offered in the classroom. They can offer unique perspectives and that the classroom environment supports those differences (Powell & Davidson, 2005). There is a strong sense of self-worth when students know that their diversity is accepted and respected in an authentic literacy classroom. In fact Barnitz (1994) explains that students can achieve success when they use authentic talk linked to their home life.

When the right classroom environment has been set up, teachers can then begin to include the various authentic elements that reflect an authentic literacy classroom. The teachers is able to get students involved and engaged in activities that are allow students to have control of their learning, just like in the real world. They will feel empowered and competent in carrying out these activities. There are a lot of student-centered activities such as conducting experiments, testing out hypothesis, real-life problem solving task and inquiry-based learning. These types of activities allow students to be motivated and provide ample opportunities for them to think, revisit, revise, build connections and develop their critical thinking skills (Ablesser, 2008; Barnitz, 1994).

Literary activities that involve real-life audiences such as putting up plays, poetry slams and an actual book reading of a piece of personal piece of writing offers deeper connections for students and the texts they come into contact with. This according to Purcell-Gates et al (2007) supports an important part of authentic literacy which is the use of curriculum-required materials in a more meaningful manner as students are personally involved with the material used compared to the usual, read-a-text-and-answer-questions approach.

When students are exposed to a variety of authentic literature that covers a whole range of popular multicultural content, they are able to make visual and mental connections between the texts and their immediate lives and that of their families and various relationships they have outside of the classroom. Discussions on the similarities and differences of cultures and lifestyles simulate real-life situations, which is an aspect of authentic literacy. Vasquez (2003) believes that the use of multicultural literature promotes “ respect, empathy and acceptance” of each other (p. 88).

An authentic literacy classroom includes methods of teaching that involves incidence where students can see real-life reading and writing taking place. The inclusion of writing workshops and dialogue journals are good ways to promote this. Collaborating with peers and making personal connections with the topic of their choice as well as the process of receiving and providing feedback increases relevance and purpose to the writing that students do. The students know that whatever writing piece they are working on will be read and reflected and commented on by real people aka their classmates or

teachers. There is genuine interest and discussion, which on their own are authentic elements of an authentic literacy classroom.

Of course a big part of an authentic literacy classroom is one that uses real-world texts. This when compared to the text book materials can be highly motivating. Authentic texts do not necessarily have to be limited to print form but can be in the form of newspaper or magazine articles, YouTube videos or even MTV music or parts of popular sitcoms or movie excerpts. Real-life materials can be used on their own or as supporting material to an actual text-book material. Whatever the case, including real-world materials allows students to see that there is more to their learning than the text book or school-related documents. This also reminds students that when people read and write texts outside of the classroom, they have specific purposes, such as wanting to get information or to communicate an idea they may have. Therefore students in an authentic literacy classroom also go through the same reasons when they read and write too.

When discussing authentic literacy classrooms, there is no avoiding the role of technology in it. Online materials and websites are transforming the way students are now accessing information and knowledge. They are developing critical thinking by having live discussions with an author of a blog or making meaning from the many related links of a certain website. Students are accessing the Internet to find solutions to the everyday problems they come across and an authentic literacy classroom will also reflect this technological tendency. Wikis, Facebook and Twitter introduces a new element into the world of literacy. It is a genre on its own that is an authentic mode of communication.

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It would go amiss if in reflecting on what an authentic literacy classroom looks like that assessment is left out. The concept of assessment is to help students improve whatever they have been learning about. Unfortunately, in a traditional classroom, test-taking has been elevated into an art, where focus on grades and how well students perform in standardized tests take precedence over what exactly students are learning and performing in. Assessment in an authentic literacy classroom should again reflect on real-world demands. These assessments should be able to provide students with concise feedback on their abilities and whether they are able to transfer their learning effectively into the real world. The assessments are not the product of learning but serve to further educate students about how they can go about improving on their learning. Newmann and colleagues (2001) showed in their research that authentic performance-based literacy assessments helps students further increase achievement, especially in terms of the quality of responses in writing and mathematics. When students were required to apply what they had learned and come up with original uses for what they have learnt, there was value placed in the assessment.

Conclusion

There is a clear need for individuals who practice lifelong learning and are able to critically read, think and write to come forth from the academic institutions of today. They must be able to compete and come up with novel ideas that meet the novel dilemmas faced by today's society. The call for authentic literacy in classrooms seems to be a good one. While policy-makers, administrators, parents, teachers and to some extent, students want

to improve test scores, there is sound reasoning as to why authentic literacy can help improve scores as well as benefit students in their learning.

When student read from authentic materials, have authentic purposes, carry out authentic tasks, discussions and collaboration, seek authentic resources to meet authentic demands, they are able to explore, argue, refine and strengthen their thought and learning processes because all that they use to learn and are learning about makes sense due to their relevance in the students' lives.

Teachers need to be quick in harnessing the advantages of authentic literacy to meet students' learning needs and goals. Each student is an individual that is different from his or her classmate. They have different learning goals and they come from different backgrounds and opinions. As problem solvers, these students can meet their goals more effectively if their learning activities are supported by the teacher's authentic literacy instruction.

Our end goal as teachers is to support students towards becoming more independent thinkers who are able to utilize what they have learned in the school to meet the challenges they face after school, and as citizens of a global society. Integrating authentic literacy learning can be a strong start towards that end goal (Ablesser, 2008; VanDeWeghe, 2008).

Maybe Meier (2002) best sums up what authentic literacy is and why it is important for today's classroom when she writes:

“ Children should be inventors of their own theories, critics of other peoples’ ideas, analyzers of evidence, and makers of their own personal marks on this most complex world” (p. 4)