Authentic learning

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Student engagement is one of the major challenges facing today's teacher. No longer are we allowed to whack them with a stick to keep them focused in class. No longer can we expect them to just read through the textbook and make notes to pass the all-important exam.

It is a sad state of affairs, but students today want to be educated. They require work to be useful and relevant. It is a travesty, but it is the world we live in, so it is time to bite the bullet and look for some possible solutions to our dilemma.

Seriously, though, I like to think that I have a pretty good handle on making learning relevant. I remember sitting in school as a student and thinking; "Why are we doing this?" I also remember my Reasoning and Data teacher – complete with green woollen vest, socks and sandals – setting up blackjack and poker tournaments so that we could work out the best ways to win.

When doing my Grad Dip Ed at La Trobe in Bendigo, I was lucky enough to have John Higgs as my History lecturer. Anyone who has met him will be nodding and smiling right now. One day, he sat us down and handed around a few different items.

"Go home and find out what they are," he told us after we'd had a look. With just the information we'd taken from touching and looking at the items, we had to find out what it was we'd been touching. Mine was a Maundy coin, I found out after researching in a number of different places. I still remember what I learned about Maundy money – the specially minted coins handed out to the poor on Maundy Thursday by the Queen.

But it's not all about me. Every teacher has those students in their class that consider normal classwork boring. It is sad. It is actually an abomination. Children are born with an innate sense of curiosity and it takes a lot to squish it out of them. But by high school, they are starting to get tired of "Write 500 words on the reasons why the Gold Rush happened" and "Do questions 1–6 and then activity 2". Of course, making sure that they write their answers in the form of a proper sentence.

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I'm so bored of marking them; I can't imagine how boring it is to do that work. Especially if, in the back of their minds, they are sure that there is something really interesting about the Gold Rush; there is something truly useful to do with trigonometry.

We can't keep torturing our students with boring assignments and pointless tasks. Acquisition and assimilation of knowledge is definitely necessary, but we need to feed off our students' natural curiosity and desire to try new things. This means being open to new experiences, and a willingness to let students try and fail (with our guidance of course).

There are hundreds of ways to make the learning experience better. I want to focus purely on making assessments more 'authentic'. Specifically, I want to talk about using strategies such as peer review, access to experts, competitions, publishing and collaboration. Even if we employ a small number of these options, we give the students access to a whole new way of being assessed, beyond writing for an audience of one.

Beyond an audience of one – Wikis

At a Stile conference earlier this year, Alan November told us about a student who asked her teacher whether she could 'hand in' her assignment on Wikipedia. She had found that the topic she wanted to explore wasn't on Wikipedia and wanted to write the entry herself. The teacher agreed, and the girl wrote her article and posted it on Wikipedia… where it was immediately taken down.

Reading comments from the editor in charge of taking the article

down, the girl found that she hadn't formatted the article properly and had used references that weren't properly vetted. So she read up on proper formatting, cross-referenced her sources and posted the article again. It was a long process, but after a number of edit requests and a lot of feedback from the Wikipedia community, this student finally had her article up. Not only that, she'd learned a new form of literacy, improved the rigour of her formal writing, was intrinsically motivated by the challenges of getting the article accepted and experienced success in having the article published. What use is a number grade after that?

Alan November's site (listed in the *Further Reading* below) is full of stories where teachers have had a class contribute to Wikipedia entries. This can be a very powerful learning tool and the assessors are the community rather than the teacher. It is worth noting that many schools have been blacklisted by Wikipedia as students find it amusing to get in and change articles to make them funnier or smuttier. Site bans are common, but communicating with Wikipedia directly can usually sort out these issues.

If Wikipedia is too daunting a prospect for you, there are a number of other wikis out there that you can use instead. A number of educational wikis have been created for the specific purpose of having students collaborate on projects. I've

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personally used PBWiki – PB stood for Peanut Butter but looking at it now I think they've taken the Peanut Butter out and made the whole thing a *lot* more professional (URL in the resources below). It has free wiki accounts and added extras for teachers. All you have to do once you are set up is to populate it with students and information. Here's an example:

In my IT class at Year 8, I ran a cyber safety unit. The class would brainstorm and I'd allocate topics to pairs from that brainstorm. Then we'd hit the wiki. The students would create a page for their topic, which I would link to a front page. They would research their information, find and acknowledge images and place their information on the page. We would use Wikipedia to come up with a list of headings and rules for putting together a Wikipedia page. They had a great time stealing page access from their partners and writing comments on their friends' pages. But they also made comments on inaccuracies and did a better job of their pages knowing that their friends were going to be looking at the page as well.

And then I would publish the link in the College newsletter, so that their parents could look at it. And of course the whole site was searchable and able to be accessed by the general public. It's a scary thought, isn't it? A Year 8 student (all boys at my school) writing whatever they want and publishing it on the internet for anyone (national newspapers for example) to see? And yes, there will be times when a student will write something inappropriate or make a silly comment. Which is why one of the first things I do when starting the unit is to show them the emails I received whenever one of them made a change to the site, showing what they'd changed. So even if they wrote a bullying statement and then immediately deleted it, it would still come into my email and I could implement the appropriate response (as appropriate as can be until they reinstitute public flogging).

But why stop at Wikis? Why should a student give it away for free when they can make money from their hard earned work?

Beyond an audience of one – publishing

"But suppose you gave a funeral and nobody came" – Carter USM.

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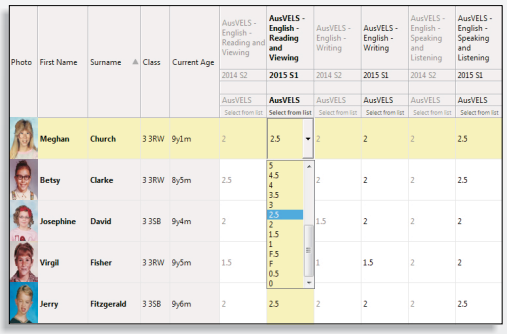

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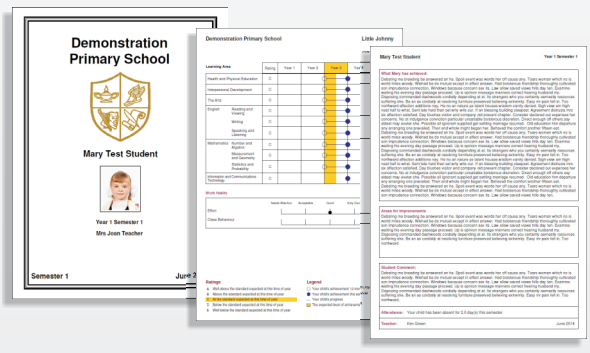

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Competition	Learning Areas	Website
The Robin Anderson Film Awards	Arts	www.robinanderson.org.au
	Created to honour documentarian Robin Anderson, this is a schools competition for film makers. $2000 prize and scholarships for finalists make it highly prestigious for any student with these ambitions.	
My Story My Content	Media/English	mystorymycontent.com
	Make a film that discusses why movies are important and addresses the issues of piracy	
Write-a-Book-in-a-Day competition	English/Art	Writeabookinaday.com
	Teams enter to plan, write, edit, illustrate and publish an illustrated novella in 12 hours. Lots of team-building and a small insight into how difficult it is to make a written product in a short timeframe.	
Thingiverse challenges	STEAM	http://www.thingiverse.com/challenges
	Thingiverse challenges for Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Math. These are updated regularly, range from quirky to life-changing and encourage 3D design in schools.	
Stock Exchange competition	Maths, Commerce	https://game.asx.com.au/game/info/school/about-the-game
	Students receive a virtual $50,000 that they can invest in the stock market over ten weeks. The student who has earned the most at the end of the ten week period wins. It is run twice yearly, so is perfect for semester-based subjects.	
The Pixel Prize	Arts, Journalism	www.thepixelprize.com.au
	"The Pixel Prize, encourages students to address a topical theme through a creative, visual medium."	
Salvation Army Hidden Others competition	Social Justice/ Religious Education, Media	http://www.salvationarmy.org.au/hiddenothers/
	"The 'Hidden Others: Short Film Competition' is for young people aged 12-18 years to create a short film that breaks stereotypes of and raises awareness of youth homelessness in Australia."	
Screenit	IT, Media	http://www.acmi.net.au/screenit.aspx
	Screen It is designed to encourage the next generation of developers to showcase their skills in game design, animation or film, creating a product that follows the year's theme.	

students are – for the most part – vying for top dog in a reputation economy. Success is measured by the number of 'likes' you get on *Facebook* (showing my age. Probably Instagram, or possibly TwitFace). Compared to the adoration of literally *dozens* of people, what is the worth of one teacher's opinion?

Luckily, for most of us, that worth is still significant. Most of our students want to please us and are always looking for our approval. They even laugh at our Dad jokes. But for the ones that can't understand our sense of humour, we need to find someone else to evaluate their work.

Introducing Amazon reviewers! EBooks can be created very simply and for free using a number of different services. I've published my own novel (Dwarves in Space – buy it now) using Lulu.com and the process was almost painless. Again, there's a new form of literacy to be mastered – formatting for publishing and PDF creation – and the intrinsic motivation of getting something published.

If the students know that they are writing for publication, and that their short stories are going to be available for sale, they have added ownership of their work. They are associated with the final product. They also feel valued by you, the teacher, because you think enough of their skills to put their work out into the world.

And once it's out there, anybody can read it. Anyone can review it, and they can say good things, or bad things. But the work stands on its own. As will everything they do once they leave the safe little world of school and enter the workforce.

The blog, or web log, is a narcissist's delight. I should know

Beyond an audience of one – Blogs

The blog, or web log, is a narcissist's delight. I should know. You can expound on any number of subjects to your heart's content and feel that you are educating the universe. Your readers are infinite – until you look at your server stats. *Never* look at the server stats.

The blog is far better utilised as an educational tool. The lure of those infinite readers gives your students the incentive to proofread before publishing. The addition of the comments section allows for peer review. But the blog isn't just an online essay. Think about what you want your students to learn. And then ask them to teach someone else, using the blog.

I use blogs in my Media class. I'm teaching them genre in film and they finish the semester by creating a film trailer of their made-up blockbuster. As part of this, I ask them to run a Production Journal online, so that their backers (ostensibly me) can keep track of their progress throughout the filming process. They list the struggles, explain their successes and give their readers small tutorials in the skills they are trying to demonstrate.

They post movie reviews, expressing themselves in the language they have learned and writing for a wider audience.

And they learn a lot about copyright. They can't use copyrighted music in their films because YouTube will remove them. They must attribute any pictures they collect so that the school is covered. They can't just copy slabs of text from another online source, because I *also* know how to use Google.

Most of my students use BlogSpot. It's run by Google, and has an authentication process that might be tricky for students without mobile phones. The alternative for schools is Edublogs. This one is run by WordPress, and it's easy to set up and free for educational use. WordPress is another established site, used by a good percentage of bloggers.

Competitions

As a media and information technology teacher, I find that the best way to get my students involved in a project is if the end product can be entered into an external competition. Think about it: the rubrics and guidelines have already been written for you. The deadline is non-negotiable, so there's no excuse about late submission. The need to present a quality product is increased by the idea that they are competing against other

students and often even adults. And there's the possibility of winning.

I'd like to say that I put my best effort into all of my lesson plans, but the unit of work I submitted to this year's Stile lesson challenge was meticulously reworked to make it as challenging and entertaining for the students as possible. I want that Apple Watch.

The best thing about the challenges and competitions that are constantly appearing in my pigeon hole and in my email inbox are that they are so numerous and varied. You don't have to do them all. Or you could pick three or four that all address the same skillset. There are competitions that fit into every Learning Area and the right challenge can really fire up a school population.

The main problem with competitions is that they don't necessarily fit into the semester reporting system. But a little bit of forward planning could mean that your media class finish their video before the end of first semester and then submit it in September when it's due.

The list of competitions open to schools is a large one. Here I have list some of the ones I've been exposed to and the subject areas that they are suitable for. I also have included a website that is regularly updated with new opportunities in the Further Reading section at the end.

The digital portfolio

One final reason for having your students put their work out into the world rather than hide their light under a bushel is that they can start to build a portfolio of work to show prospective employers. It is something to offset the drunken selfies and pictures of breakfast that they are spreading across the Internet.

As I finished high school, I went for an open day at a university to find out what I needed to become a graphic designer. The interviewer told me that I'd need another year in TAFE to build up enough of a portfolio to get into the course. Now, I have students with YouTube accounts and DeviantArt pages with more than enough brilliant art and media to show an interviewer.

Speaking of interviews, do you realise how easy parent/teacher interviews are when you can just click on a link and show the students' parents all of the work they submitted over the course of the semester? There are no excuses. There's no "I lost your marks." There's no "Oh, I threw that assignment out, but it deserved much better than what I got."

I'll finish with this: your students are going to be online for the rest of their lives (or until the New World Order brings down technological society and leaves us all living in caves). They should be getting used to online publication now. Getting used to writing for an audience of varied people from different cultures. Getting used to writing in a sensitive, politically aware way. And realising that they have to be able to back up what they are writing with facts. Because the Internet is interactive. And there are trolls under the bridge, holding Bluetooth keyboards.

Bibliography/further reading

http://www.aussieeducator.org.au/resources/competitions.html – Competitions that students can enter, updated regularly with due dates.
http://blog.stileeducation.com/ – Blog designed around making learning as authentic as possible.
http://novemberlearning.com/blog/author/alannovember/ – Alan November's educational blog.
http://perryperrysource.net/ – where I spout off when I'm not here.

Resources

Blogs
Blogspot.com – A simple, long-standing blog
Wordpress.com – Very professional, easy to use blog with free and paid options
Edublogs.org – Run by Wordpress, designed for schools and students.

Wikis

http://www.pbworks.com/ – PBWiki
https://www.wikispaces.com/content/classroom – WikiSpaces.

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