

BYRAM HILLS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
ARMONK, NEW YORK

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Title of Project: *Self-Directed Learning in the Art Classroom*

Year: 2013-2014

School/Grade: Byram Hills High School 9-12 Fine Arts Department

SUMMARY OF *INVESTIGATORS OF PRACTICE* ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Context:

“If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.”

— Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

As an art teacher working with high school students, I was interested in what ways I could offer students more authentic art experiences that empower them to ask their own questions and seek answers that directly relate to art they want to create. While working with my advanced-level Film II and Film Workshop students, an idea came about as these students routinely (and informally) shared information about techniques that they had researched themselves and could employ when they needed to apply a particular editing skill or effect.

I’m always thinking about ways to make learning about filmmaking feel more authentic to my students. Filmmaking is decision making and problem solving. It’s uniquely a collaborative art where an unanticipated or new skill may be needed to help tell a story. I wanted to know more about how “self-directed” learning (SDL) could teach them how to independently learn and create better stories. I wanted to also know how SDL could best be incorporated into these student-centered classes and enrich the learning experience.

Action Plan:

My initial research question was “What benefits can be derived from students following a self-directed learning experience (which incorporates technology) that can be integrated into an art project?” I soon realized that although technology was important to the self-directed experience, it wasn’t sufficient in and of itself.

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Educator Malcolm Knowles refers to self-directed learning as an “adventure.” He asked, “How can a teacher turn students on to learning and thus take advantage of this adventure?” As an artist and teacher, this appealed to me. I like instilling in my students a sense of possibility. As a film teacher, I see how it also promotes collaborative behavior by allowing students to try things that they researched together for a project rather than just observe each others findings.

Through my research I discovered that *self-directed learning* fundamentally empowers students to take more interest in and responsibility for decisions that influence their education. As the term suggests, SDL orients learners to be responsible owners and managers of their own learning process. SDL integrates self-management (management of the context, including the social setting, resources, and actions) and self-monitoring.

In my Advanced Film classroom, I would normally provide the learning that would be used in my students’ films. This could be in the form of a shooting or editing skill that is universally important. I decided to create a lesson for my advanced class, Film Workshop, where I allowed them to choose a topic (in the form of an editing skill or shooting technique) that would be used in an upcoming film. Through PowerPoint presentations, students created & presented their own “self directed” solutions that were specific to their next movie project.

Results:

Through my readings and research, I found out that Self-Directed Learning addresses what people need to do when they want to learn. Self-directed learning feels natural as it satisfies students’ natural curiosity. Learning varies with the level of maturity of the learner. Learning of this type is subject-centered, motivated by external rewards like grades. In contrast, the self-directed learner establishes the scope and breadth of the learning desired and builds upon the process and experiences as rich resources for learning. Through my readings I learned:

- Learning is developed from life tasks.
- Students approach self directed learning through problem-centered questions that need to be solved.

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- Learning is motivated by internal incentives.

After each of my students developed their topic independently and created a powerpoint, I met informally with many of them to discuss how this experience impacted their learning. Here are some ideas from my readings that were reinforced by students through our conversations. As the research suggested:

- Self-direction doesn't mean that the learning is isolated. *Several students mentioned how they enjoyed walking around the class, discussing their concept, and getting positive reactions from their peers.*
- The teacher creates a warm environment where both students and teacher become resources. *Not only were students responsible for teaching each other specific concepts, but I made a big deal when a student was able to introduce me to some newer topics in which I had limited background. Students mentioned that they were happy that I wasn't just lecturing about the material.*
- Intellectual trust must be established for learning to take place in this peer-to-peer student-centered environment. *My students liked the idea that they had a choice in content.*
- Evidence of this trust shows in all participants' willingness to take intellectual risks, share findings and make adjustments for completion and clarity. *Students mentioned that they felt comfortable during critiques.*

As the facilitator, my challenge was helping students translate their needs into self-learning objectives that were clear, feasible and at appropriate levels. Through my reading about SDL, I noticed that I was also getting excited about what my students were learning because -I was learning too. Students first identified what skill or shooting technique they wanted to learn about. Together we discussed how it all might be achieved. During the lesson, we spent time as group at the beginning of each class period. During that time, we talked and evaluated progress through short group discussions. Their research led to an informative PowerPoint presentation about how to color correct footage so that separate shots visually matched in tone and color grade.

Implications:

The process feels authentic. However, I learned that this approach takes a tremendous amount of commitment, organization and trust when designing a plan for learning. In this

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SDL environment, I did become much more of the facilitator than teacher. To me, there is an “organic” nature during SDL:

- Technology can be used extensively
- Students learned to take ownership by learning technical skills
- Working with an advanced class helped establish a comfortable rapport. I found communication skills to be the most important prerequisite for students to be able to learn and share information

It's my job to establish what roles students take in the learning process. Although the students were highly motivated, at times their presentations were not as organized or useful as a resource for people just being introduced to the topic. As I think about refining this process within the context of this lesson, I will include a formal “learning contract.” It will serve as another useful tool to better organize student materials and add clarity to exactly why students want to pursue a given topic and direction. I also feel that I can use a few exemplars from this class to help future students see the positive and negative in each presentation. Overall, the experience was positive; however, I had the benefit of working with students I had in previous years and developed a trust with. I am not sure if this could have been replicated with first-levels who are still new to the processes of filmmaking.

References:

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