Chapter 47
Authentic Education:
Affording, Engaging, and Reflecting

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ABSTRACT

Active learning challenges students to take ownership of their learning engagements by engaging actively in developing skills, which includes literary skills, linking the practice to theory, as well as thinking about practical and theoretical implications. Textual analysis of their learning journals revealed that students who chose "authentic education" over "instructionism" understood the technical issues of the knowledge better. They were also more creative and committed. Their learning process conveys that they are empowered in understanding the connections between the practical and theoretical dimensions and that they are open to deal with uncertainty. The findings indicate that the construction of learning by self-directed and empowered students can be formed by a community of these students. This is explored in this chapter.

INTRODUCTION

Despite Newsweek (2010) ranked KZ 14th worldwide in education with a literacy rate of 99.5%, I experienced a first-hand preference for rote learning (Lillis, 2009) among Kazakhstani students during the fall semester of 2010. Kazakhstan (KZ) is the 9th largest country in the world, with about sixteen million people and about ninety higher education institutions. Many students would want to be challenged by a demanding learning experience (McInnis, 2001).

The notion of "authentic learning" originated two decades ago as a simple idea based on apprenticeship (Resnick, 1987). It is a subset of situated learning that connects skills development to theory construction, that is practice to knowledge (Collins, 1988; Collins, Brown, & Newmand, 1989). Authentic learning connects tasks (engagements) to the know-how and then to know-why knowledge. In classroom setting, the active learning engagements connect the situational know-how knowledge to theoretical know-why knowledge and provide students with more authentic situations. In authentic learning, the teaching and learning process should empower the teachers and the students to exploit all available opportunities for "more authenticity" (Cronin, 1993, p. 79).

Authentic learning is not a simple concept. Its meaning is broad. Its many intertwining components make the notion complex. The deployment of authentic cases or problems in traditional curricula does not make the curricula authentic. The exploitation and provision of *all* available opportunities need certain requirements and conditions to learning, such as cognition, creativity, motivation to engage, reflection, and active learning experience.

BACKGROUND

The primary and secondary problems are: *Had learning occurred? How did students confront the complexity of the Financial Statement Analysis course (FSA) as they engaged in the in-depth and reflective experiences of authentic learning?* Reflections of practitioners in a community are generally not available, but not in FSA. Reflective journals were components of student's portfolio which was a summative assessment. The FSA students could be sensitive or insensitive as well as responsive or unresponsive to conduct independent active in-depth learning required by the curriculum. Their social (and hopefully emotional) interactions accounted their learning journey, learning experience, and reasons of success or failure. The reflective journals represent measurable summative assessment. Students' interactions with their facilitator and their classmates were recognized and reflected upon. Their interactions recorded in the learning journals demand re-evaluation (this manuscript) of what evidence is, a need that is met by the reflective practice and the evidence it provides.

The learning journeys of fourteen students in the case study highlighted complex issues of authentic learning, namely: (1) knowledge construction events for students to transform themselves; (2) students' awareness and their socialization; and (3) the empowered self as a reflection of what actually was in front of the "mirror." The premise is that the reflection is an outcome of knowledge construction (events), a representation of constructed knowledge (identity), and a way of cognitive thinking fraught with ambiguity and subjectivity (Sartre, 1996, 1998). The case study explores, understands, and shares the events, the identity, and the self of the authentic learning as the intertwining strands of a twisted rope, which is the authentic education. The case study represents an inverted triangle of three layers. The top-most first domain is the higher education institution in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The middle domain is the Financial Statement Analysis (FSA) course in the spring 2011 semester. The lowest third domain is the abstract case consisting complex issues.

Believing that authentic education would be workable in an institution that has claimed to be world-class, I introduced it in all my three classes in the spring semester of 2011. One was the FSA class. It was double-coded as ACC4208 and FIN4214 for the first time for both senior and graduating Accounting- and Finance-major students.

Two sections ran concurrently from 17:30 to 19:30 every Tuesday and Thursday. In the first section, a Kazakhstani instructor utilized a traditional teaching approach. His course consisted of five short exams, two projects, and a forty-percent final exam covering Chapter 1 to Chapter 12 of Penman (2010). I took charge of the second section and utilized a non-traditional approach. I focused on Chapters 13 and 14 of Stickney, Brown, and Wahlen (2007) with supplementary chapters from both textbooks of Penman (2010) and Stickney *et al.* (2007). The two chapters ran throughout the semester with other chapters sprinkled into the discussions along the journey. A forty-percent summative assessment included a project of student's own choosing, students' learning portfolio, the reflective learning journal, and a mind map. Students were storytellers who were encouraged to see their studies of FSA as a construction of personal and social stories.

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