

Chapter 67

The Integration of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Project-Based Learning in a Blended Environment

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ABSTRACT

The use of blended learning environments is rapidly expanding in education. This chapter examines a teacher's enactment of the New Tech Network educational model, which utilizes a blended learning environment, and the teaching strategies she used to engage students and gauge student achievement. Detailed teacher interviews, classroom observations, and analyses of student assignments were the sources of data for the study. The findings centered on the integration of culturally relevant pedagogy and authentic instruction within this learning environment and the implications of this integration. Recommendations for future research include a more expansive study of the use of blended learning in social studies and different means of integrating culturally relevant pedagogy and authentic instruction into blended learning.

INTRODUCTION

It has been noted that traditional teaching methods, such as completing worksheets, reading from textbooks, and memorizing information, are overly utilized in social studies (Levstik, 2008). Additionally, the content taught in many social studies classes lacks the cultural diversity that reflects the demographics of the United States and the global community. These issues are often

exacerbated in urban settings where there may be a higher proportion of African American and Latino American students and, hence, more differences between the culture acknowledged in the social studies curriculum and the culture of the students. It is possible that concerns of engagement, diversity, and achievement in social studies classes may be addressed by project-based learning and the blended learning environment within the New Tech Network (NTN) educational model.

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The NTN model centers on project-based learning in a small high school (less than 100 students per grade level) and technology-rich (1:1 student to computer ratio) environment (NTN, 2014b).

In this chapter, findings from a qualitative case study are utilized to demonstrate how a teacher's enactment of the New Tech Network model was effectively used to engage diverse students in social studies and help them to master curricular content. In the fall of 2012, a researcher conducted interviews, observed classes, and analyzed documents to gain insight into the pedagogical practices and beliefs of Ms. Olivia Jordan (pseudonym), the Engagement High School 2012-2013 Teacher of the Year. This study occurred in a social studies classroom for an entire instructional unit centered on the lasting impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on an urban area in North Carolina. The objectives of this chapter are to:

- Describe how Ms. Jordan utilized the blended learning environment within the New Tech Network model to engage students and ensure student mastery of curricular content;
- Explore how culturally relevant pedagogy and authentic instruction contributed to Ms. Jordan's success in this learning environment.

BACKGROUND

There is substantial evidence that students tend to like social studies classes the least amongst all school courses (Shaughnessy & Haladyna, 1985, as cited in Heafner, 2004; Goodlad, 1984, as cited in Ladson-Billings, 2001). Heafner (2004) noted, "Many teachers struggle with the lack of student interest in the content which translates into a lack of motivation to learn. This is especially prevalent in social studies classrooms" (p. 43). This lack of interest may be true for a variety of reasons. First of all, the instructional methods

that are used in many social studies classes tend to be non-collaborative in nature. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (2010) noted that direct lecture, reading from the textbook, and taking tests and quizzes that assess a student's ability to retrieve memorized information were typical teaching methods utilized in social studies. Additionally, social studies content often lacks an acknowledgement or celebration of student culture (Ladson-Billings, 2001). In an increasingly diverse society, it is very important to make sure the social studies curriculum has cultural relevance for students and will prepare them for life in a multicultural society.

In this section, an overview of scholarly literature is provided that has been written on engagement and achievement in social studies. Specifically, there is a focus on authentic instruction and assessments, blended learning environments, project based learning, and culturally relevant pedagogy, which have been found to engage students in social studies and to promote their academic achievement.

Authentic Instruction and Assessment in Social Studies

Research shows that students' interest and engagement increases when learning is connected to authentic, real-world problems (Newmann, King, & Carmichael, 2007). Through authentic instruction and assessments, students are engaged in activities that require them to use skills and perform tasks that have relevance for life outside of school. Newmann, Bryk, and Nagaoka (2001) also explained that there was evidence "that when teachers organize instruction around assignments that demand higher order thinking, in-depth understanding, elaborated communication, and that make a connection to students' lives beyond school, students produce more intellectually complex work" (p. 2). This authentic intellectual work has been found to heighten student engagement and achievement (Carmichael & Martens, 2012).

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