

DLSI NEWSLETTER

Supporting Teaching and Learning at La Salle

Frank Mosca & Pres Feden
Interim Directors

May 2022
Issue 5

AUTHENTICITY

It may be cliché, but I recently had my students read Margery Williams' classic children's book, [The Velveteen Rabbit](#) in order to help define and center our conversation around **authenticity**, another significant factor in how people learn. We had a lively discussion considering how the Skin Horse replied when Rabbit asks him, "What is REAL," and if it happens all at once.

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

Authenticity plays a dual role for us as educators. The first is a personal one. **Authentic people** are often described as genuine, straightforward, and acting without pretention. We all know authentic people, and can likely conjure up

teachers from our past who we would describe as authentic. Perhaps not surprisingly, they are often the educators who have had the most positive impact on us.

The value of teacher authenticity is frequently explored at the K-12 level, but [Johnson & LaBelle \(2017\)](#) wanted to know how students thought about authenticity in college classrooms. They prompted subjects with a definition, concluding with: "When a teacher is being authentic, you might also get the sense that they critically reflect on themselves, their relationships with students, and their own teaching" (p.427).

Their research identified characteristics of both authentic and inauthentic professors. Notably, and perhaps unsurprisingly, authentic educators were **approachable, passionate, attentive, and capable**. They go on to specify further, but more importantly, the authors point out that teaching authentically is not simply about "practicing effective teaching strategies." Rather, students perceived educators as authentic when they were "**acting out of genuine concern, respect,**

and care...[and] their actions and words communicated to students that they were **valued and an important part of the learning process.**" Further, students "provided rich descriptions of teachers for whom they experienced high levels of positive affect" (Johnson & Labelle, 2017, p. 434-435), indicating the positive outcomes that result from authenticity. Simply put, **students benefit from authentic, supportive, and caring relationships with their teachers.**

It's a personal work in progress for each of us, which, of course, is not without challenge. Authenticity requires effort, and vulnerability, which can certainly be uncomfortable, and not without inconvenience, but the effort is well worth it for both ourselves and our students.

"Does it hurt?," asked the Rabbit?

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real, you don't mind being hurt."



ENGAGING PRACTICES ON CAMPUS

Jennifer Kleinow, Professor, Chair, and Graduate Program Director, Communication Sciences and Disorders shares:

I recently came across a surprising issue of *Topics in Cognitive Science* centered on...well... **surprise**. Feeling surprised is a powerful signal that a gap exists between what we expect and observe, which sets the stage for powerfully **authentic learning**. Because humans are endlessly surprising, it's relatively simple to include elements of surprise in our teaching.

The "surprise sequence" generally begins with a pause as we notice something unexpected and acutely focus attention on it. To make sense of the situation, we compare our current observation with our existing schema. If we can't justify the observation based on what we know, we become highly motivated to learn something new, or change our belief. We also like to share our surprises. Think of how many "spoiler alerts" appear online after the season finale of a popular show!

Surprise engages students and encourages "thinking on your feet." For example, I'll introduce an interactive case study where the students expect to conduct a standard pediatric articulation evaluation. Together we plan to administer an articulation test. So far, so good! But as we work through

the assessment, I'll add more information to complicate the case. True to the "real world", some symptoms might be surprising or inconsistent with the expected diagnosis.

Students need to pause and focus on their observations. Which symptoms fit their expectations? Which don't? Could the child have apraxia? Is there evidence of a cleft palate? The students must change their diagnostic strategy based on the new information. It's exciting to watch the students work through the possibilities, which leads to enthusiastic discussions at the end of the activity.

AUTHENTIC EDUCATION

Every six months, airline pilots are required to complete training on safety protocols and procedures. There are a couple of ways for an industry to deal with ongoing training. Employees could be given a manual to read, they might be brought into corporate headquarters to sit through a presentation, or they could be provided with a self-paced, distance education course on the subject matter.

Pilots don't do any of these. Instead, every six months, an airline pilot has to spend several days, *in a flight simulator*, practicing emergency procedures, while being assessed by

an examiner. Knowing that this **authentic experience** is a significant part of commercial pilot training certainly makes *me* more comfortable when traveling.

While the first role of authenticity is a personal one, it also carries **instructional significance**. For educators, the challenge can be framed this way: **is it possible to shift our classroom focus from the requirement to master content to one that provides immersion into our disciplines?** In *How Humans Learn*, Joshua Eyler (2018) suggests we begin with our learning goals, asking ourselves what kinds of **student experiences** could help us achieve those goals?

There are many options for the inclusion of authentic educational experiences. While the most obvious are internships and field work, Eyler also suggests using our own research, working it into assignments and activities, and allowing students to ask questions and extend ideas.

While undergraduate research is an obvious choice, simulations, experiments, writing groups, and cooperative learning activities can also provide authentic experiences. I would encourage you to add or expand upon authentic experiences as you prepare your for your next classes.

JOURNEY TOWARD AUTHENTIC LEARNING

Pres Feden, Professor Emeritus, Education Department

During my time at LaSalle, I taught a course titled Medicine in America: From Witch Doctor to Which Doctor. Medicine links with much that Americans value: material success, progress, morality, ethics, and equity (especially regarding race and gender).

I started the course by planning a unit that introduced many of the concepts listed above. I chose to use Philadelphia's 1793 yellow fever epidemic that killed approximately 5,000 of the 50,000 people living in the city, and had a profound effect on how Philadelphia developed.

The first semester I taught the course, I began with a brief lecture about the epidemic. However, I found that I needed a bigger impact.

Deciding to apply what I knew about **in situ learning**, the following semester I led students on a tour of city sites and people that were important during the epidemic. It was clearly a better experience for the students.

However, the third time I taught the course, I employed a much more **authentic approach**. Rather than leading the tour, I assigned each student a site to research. Then, preparing to become tour guides, students decided what and how to communicate. They also arranged to have the tour filmed, and off we went on a student-led yellow fever tour of Philadelphia.

Sites presented by students included Elfreth's Alley, Old City Hall, The Powell House, Dolly Todd's House, Dr. Benjamin Rush's House, Bishop White's House, the Free Quaker Meetinghouse, and Bethel A.M.E Church, among others. The students **became tour guides, each contributing to weave together the story** of the epidemic. The project culminated with a student-produced video of the tour, which, with help from the Communications Department appeared for a time on La Salle TV.

THE FINAL HOUR

Student teachers submit a portfolio to seminar instructors at the end of the semester. This structured activity documents their journey toward becoming a professional educator, and requires them to provide, and reflect upon, artifacts that document their progress toward meeting ten, nationally recognized teaching standards. Portfolios frequently arrive in a three-ring binder, and are typically thoughtful and comprehensive.

My practice is to ask for pieces of the project throughout the semester, commenting and providing feedback as we go. When final versions arrive, I have a good idea of the contents, but I read through them again, and write more comments both in the portfolio and on an accompanying grading rubric. It takes some time.

Then, the binders linger at my door, waiting for retrieval into the next semester. Occasionally, they are not picked up at all. Despite the hope that my words of wisdom will have some meaningful impact, I've come to the conclusion that it is fairly likely most students don't read the feedback with as much thoroughness as I devote. It's a final project. It's human nature.

I recently stumbled upon a [genius suggestion by Dr. Gary Hafer](#), published in Faculty Focus. Dr. Hafer hosts "**the final hour.**" Similarly, he sees student portfolios develop throughout the semester. After grading, and during finals week, a message is sent to each student with their grade, and an invitation to stop by to meet for "the final hour." A time period set aside where students can ask questions about their grade, offer comments, or just stop by to chat. Final course grades are submitted after this time expires, in the event an adjustment has to be made.

Hafer suggests that this has even led him to be a more careful and "honest" grader, because he has to personally defend his assessments. Not every student takes advantage, but I like really the idea, and plan to implement it the next time I use a culminating project.