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# Authentic Learning Experiences: Investigating How Teachers Can Lead Their Students to Intrinsic Motivation in Meaningful Work

## **Abstract**

This action research study investigated how an authentic learning experience impacted the motivation and engagement of students toward finding intrinsic value in meaningful work in a sophomore English classroom at a private Christian high school in the Midwest. The participants were 57 sophomores at the high school taking required English 10. The students participated in an authentic learning experience (ALE) designed by their teacher in which they were split into 10 teams, each team writing and designing one issue the sophomore class's newspaper. The 57 students completed an anonymous survey at the conclusion of the authentic learning experience. Eight students were randomly chosen to be interviewed about their experiences in the ALE. The results of the study suggested that authentic learning experiences do contribute to the overall motivation and engagement of students to find intrinsic value in their work.

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Investigating How Teachers Can Lead Their Students to Intrinsic Motivation in Meaningful  
Work

By

Rhonda Van Donge

B.A. Dordt College, 1999

Action Research Thesis  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
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Department of Education  
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Intrinsic Motivation in Meaningful Work

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### **Abstract**

This action research study investigated how an authentic learning experience impacted the motivation and engagement of students toward finding intrinsic value in meaningful work in a sophomore English classroom at a private Christian high school in the Midwest. The participants were 57 sophomores at the high school taking required English 10. The students participated in an authentic learning experience (ALE) designed by their teacher in which they were split into 10 teams, each team writing and designing one issue the sophomore class's newspaper. The 57 students completed an anonymous survey at the conclusion of the authentic learning experience. Eight students were randomly chosen to be interviewed about their experiences in the ALE. The results of the study suggested that authentic learning experiences do contribute to the overall motivation and engagement of students to find intrinsic value in their work.



The needs of today's students are changing. "No pupil in the history of education is like today's modern learner. This is a complex, energetic, and tech-savvy individual" (The Critical, 2017). Students need skills that will allow them to be successful in an ever changing and expanding workforce. In the early 1900's, 95% of jobs in the United States called for low-skilled workers (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008) to work mainly as production workers and laborers (Fisk, 2003). In 2008, the workforce called instead for workers with specialized knowledge and skills (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008). The growth of service industries in the 20th century jumped from 31% in 1900 to 78% of all workers in 1999 (Fisk, 2003). Our global economy and expanding technology "have redefined what it takes . . . to prosper" as working members of our shrinking world (Hale, 1999, p. 9). Students today have very different needs to prepare them for the workforce than students did earlier in our nation's history. It is the responsibility of our educational system to lead the students to skills that will prepare them for their future as working members of a constantly evolving society.

When students graduate, they need to be prepared to join a global economy and workforce. This workforce wants people with analytical skills and initiative to problem-solve. Workers need creativity to find new solutions by looking from different angles in order to synthesize information. Collaboration and communication are essential as students will find themselves working and communicating with people from all over the world. They need to be able to communicate their values and beliefs effectively with other people. Finally, businesses want employees with ethical standards who want to be held accountable and responsible for how they handle situations in their job (The Critical, 2017). In short, our students need to graduate from our schools prepared to join a work force that calls for skills in communication and

collaboration, as well as skills in researching, collecting, analyzing, synthesizing and applying knowledge. Because of this, schools need to equip and enable students to do more than memorize and regurgitate information. Students need to be able to think critically, to transfer knowledge to new situations, and to adapt in different environments and with many people (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008). Students need to take an active and independent role in their education to be prepared for what lies ahead outside of the school building.

The key to preparing our students in these skills starts with motivation. Teachers need to motivate students to become engaged in the classroom so that they can participate in their own learning. Motivation gives students the “direction, intensity, quality, and persistence of [their] energies” (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012). Motivation happens by creating learning that challenges the students, that allows them to show what they have discovered in a product that has greater purpose than the classroom assignment, thus giving them the confidence to master the next problem or task set before them. As teachers equip them to grow into responsible individuals motivated to achieve for the intrinsic value of their learning (Beesley, Clark, Barker, Germeroth, & Apthorp, 2010), students will feel prepared to join a workforce that demands communication, collaboration, researching, collecting, analyzing, synthesizing and application of knowledge (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008). The challenge of designing curriculum laced with motivation falls then on the teachers tasked with preparing our students for this future.

Students are motivated by real world learning. “The more we focus on students’ ability to devise effective solutions to real world problems, the more successful those students will become” (The Critical, 2017). Students feel disengaged when they do not feel that what they are learning is relevant to their own lives (Certo, Cauley, Moxley, & Chafin, 2008). They need

opportunities in learning that show them what it means to be a productive member of society (Cronin, 1993). Beesley et al (2010) stated that research has shown that students involved in their community are more likely to excel and thrive in all areas of their lives. Community service opportunities increase students' future involvement and behavior in their communities. Introducing service in the curriculum led to better social behavior and future involvement in the community.

Choice in learning also motivates students to engage in the classroom. When teachers simply pass on information, students do not have as great of a chance to connect personally with the knowledge, with each other, with the teacher, and with the real world (Kalantzis & Cope, 2004). Choice allows students to self-regulate, to make goals, to make a plan, to make a commitment, and then to reflect on what they have done. When given choices, students feel a sense of control in their own learning.

Self-efficacy allows the students to take on a task and to believe that they can do the task. Teachers then have the responsibility of giving feedback to their students in order to raise the students' self-efficacy, to guide them in their learning process while allowing them to use trial and error (Beesley et al, 2010). Teachers motivate students by creating student-directed learning balanced well with the teacher as coach and facilitator in the classroom.

Critical thinking and problem solving also motivate students. If a teacher stands in front of a classroom of students who are disengaged from what she is teaching, little hope remains that any deep learning and critical thinking skills are taking place. A teacher needs to create a classroom in which disengagement is not an option, where learning demands the students' full attention, where what happens in the class creates the challenge and rigor most students

ultimately crave (Kalantzis & Cope, 2004). When students are engaged both cognitively and behaviorally, students' effort and concentration are high. Students choose tasks that challenge and initiate action. Without motivation to engage in critical thinking, students become passive, defensive, and bored. They give up easily (Beesley et al, 2010).

Further, being a community of learners motivates students. Cooperative learning results in higher achievement than competitive or individual learning does (Beesley et al, 2010).

Working in community leads to students who are more willing to take on difficult tasks that involve higher-level reasoning, more creativity, positive attitudes, more time spent on task, higher motivation and thus higher satisfaction (Beesley et al, 2010). Students feel connected in caring, supportive classrooms (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012).

According to Kalantzis and Cope (2004), "learning happens by design" (p. 39).

Classroom motivation happens when students are "psychologically engaged, active participants in school, who also value and enjoy the experiences of learning at school" (Quin, 2016, p. 345). By designing a classroom setting in which students are involved in real world problems with an authentic audience, in the need for deeper critical thinking skills, and in defining the problem and the direction for the solution (Rule, 2006), teachers develop motivated students who recognize the "intrinsic fulfillment of meaningful work" (Romano, 2009 p. 36). These students become equipped with the skills and attitudes to be successful after their formal education is completed.

Authentic learning experiences (ALE's) are the "learning by design" (Kalantzis & Cope, 2004) students need to develop the motivation to engage them in the classroom. When they understand meaning behind learning, they become engaged. Instead of giving students a math equation to figure out, the teacher can ask them how much it is going to cost for the school to

pave the entire parking lot. Instead of having them write a fake letter in order to learn proper letter formatting, they can write a letter to a family member or friend about the last book they read. Instead of researching a recent war, they can interview a war veteran for firsthand information. Instead of studying various websites to understand how they are made, students can work directly with local businesses to create websites for the business's actual use (O'Hanlon, 2008). Teachers then give their students meaning in their classroom work and the rigor that students ultimately want (Romano, 2009). Students want to be challenged with high expectations for achievement, knowing that their teacher does in fact believe they all can achieve success (Varuzza, Eschenauer, & Blake, 2014; Vetter, 2010). The teacher needs to help the students feel they are competent to accomplish real world work (Vetter, 2010). With clear expectations, time to delve into the work, and freedom to explore, students find motivation to learn (Lawrence & Harrison, 2009). They find that intrinsic value in what they learn, as well as the sense of accomplishment and satisfaction in a job well done (Romano, 2009). The teacher becomes the facilitator rather than the director (Vetter, 2010). Teachers no longer stand at the front of the room lecturing; rather, they coach their students through the learning process. Teachers can guide students to this kind of learning through ALE's.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Authentic learning experiences have the power to pull students to that "intrinsic value of meaningful work." Students will have work that allows them to interact, to take ownership of their learning, and to work outside the classroom (Varuzza et al., 2014). This study sought to answer the question: Do authentic learning experiences in secondary English classrooms lead to "the intrinsic fulfillment" of secondary students? In other words, do authentic learning

experiences lead to greater levels of motivation thus leading to greater engagement as students realize the importance of the work they are doing for their future lives?

### **Definitions**

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions will be used. Unless otherwise noted, the definitions are those of the author.

Authentic Learning Experiences: classroom activities with a real world/real audience focus that incorporate critical thinking skills, that center around a community of learners, and that are student-directed rather than teacher-directed.

Motivation: direction and energy in a student's behavior that empowers them to take on a challenge, to do quality work, and to persist until they have accomplished a meaningful goal (Beesley et al, 2010, Fredricks & McColskey, 2012).

Engagement: cognitive or behavioral action that results from a high level of motivation and leads to strong effort, concentration, enthusiasm, and curiosity (Beesley et al, 2010).

Real World Experiences: classroom activities that tie directly to situations that happen in the world outside the classroom that students may encounter in their daily life now or in the future.

Real World Audience: an audience for classroom work other than the teacher, such as parents, school community, public audience beyond the school, anyone capable of critiquing student work, and recipients of service done by the students (Wagner, 2017).

Critical thinking skills: ability to think clearly and rationally, to engage in reflection, to synthesize and analyze, and to think independently, creatively, and with vision.

Community of Learners: multiple students or the class as a whole engaged together in the learning process, working collaboratively rather than in competition.

Student-directed learning: students taking responsibility and ownership in their learning while the teacher becomes more of a facilitator and coach.

Intrinsic value of meaningful work: when students feels personal satisfaction, enjoyment, curiosity, and focus in the activity itself, not from an outside force.

### **Summary**

Because of our changing work force, our global economy, and the changing skills required of our graduated students, authentic learning experiences have become essential for our students. We need students to step out of the classroom ready to problem-solve, to find solutions, to think critically and analytically, to collaborate, to communicate effectively, and to be ethical and accountable in the workforce. To be successful in their future, they need authentic learning experiences now to get them actively involved in their learning so that what they gain from their education is the “intrinsic fulfillment of meaningful work” which will “develop a productive, tenacious attitude toward such work” that they can “take . . .with them throughout their lives” (Romano, 2009, p. 30).

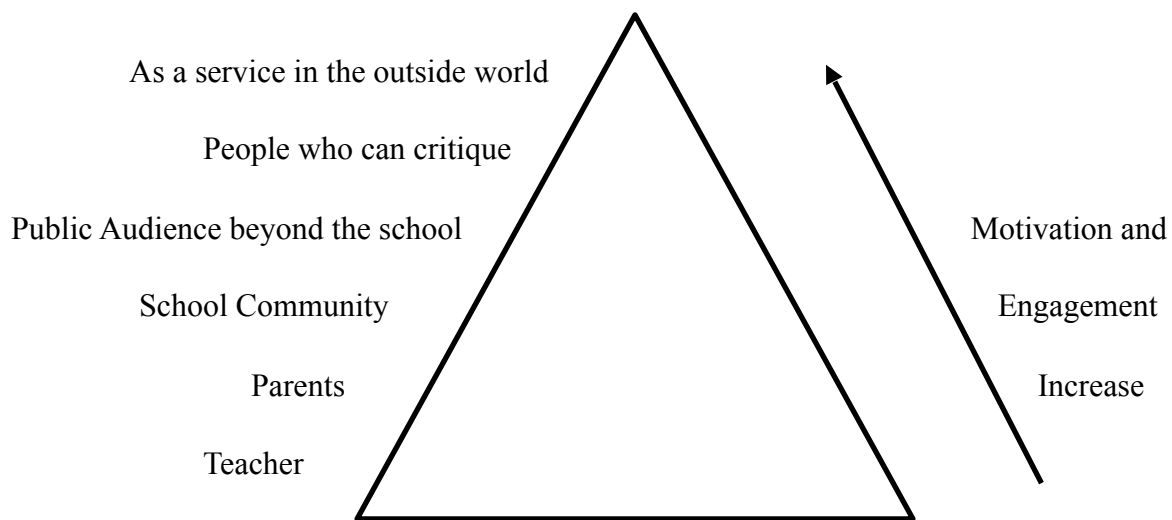
## **Literature Review**

### **Four Characteristics of an Authentic Learning Experience**

When teachers plan for an authentic learning experience, four characteristics encompass what makes those plans authentic. There must be a real world problem, use of inquiry and critical thinking skills, a community of learners working together, and student choice in their learning.

ALE’s use real world problems with impact outside of the classroom to motivate and teach students (Rule, 2006). For example, an English teacher can connect her students with pen

pals from another country so that rather than writing letters only for the sake of learning the format, they can learn the format while writing letters to these pen pals. Part of a real world problem, as in this example, means a real world audience. Berger (2017) has implemented what he calls the “hierarchy of audience.” According to Berger (2017), as the authenticity of the audience increases, so does the motivation and engagement of the students. At the bottom of the hierarchy is the audience of the teacher, followed by parents, the school community, a public audience beyond the school, people capable of critiquing the students’ work, and at the top of Berger’s hierarchy is authentic work done for service to the world (Wagner, 2017).



*Figure 1.* Figure that shows the hierarchy of audience for whom students can present their work in order to increase student motivation and engagement (Wagner, 2017).

By incorporating both real world and real need elements, students’ view of the world broadens as the world is brought into the scope of their learning environment (Kalantzis & Copel, 2004).



Use of inquiry and critical thinking skills is another characteristic of authentic learning experiences. The teacher creates problems that the students can use to discover, inquire, and deduce (Rule, 2006). Teachers push students to think outside of the box as they connect the learning to the real world. This critical thinking may happen through hands-on activities, through debate, or through problem solving (Certo et al, 2003). For example, at Silverton School, in Silverton, Colorado, students used critical thinking skills as they discovered what it means to be “rich” or “poor”. The students looked at personal finances, national economic problems, and then global issues of wealth and poverty to come to an understanding that being rich or poor is not measured only by money (Expeditions, n.d.).

ALE’s also share the characteristic of being formed within a community of learners. Even if students are working individually to find a solution to a real world problem, they are all in a community of inquiry, striving for answers within an environment created by the need for discovery. Students may collaborate in problem solving, creating, or presenting. They talk, argue, and discuss with their peers while searching for solutions. They become actively involved in making meaning (Kukral & Spector, 2012). For examples, they may collaborate with their fellow students by writing a website together (Mac & Coniam, 2008), with the community by working hand in hand on a community project or by offering valuable services to businesses (O’Hanlon, 2008), or with a real audience through a newspaper or bulletin (Mac & Coniam, 2008).

Finally, ALE’s allow students to direct their own learning. They have ownership and responsibility in the problem at hand. Teachers give choice to allow the students to both define the problem and design how to find the solution (Rule, 2006). Teachers may use mini-lessons to

guide students through the decision-making process and to lead them to real life skills, but as students are equipped, they become the primary directors of their learning (Huntley-Johnston, Merritt, & Huffman, 1997). Teachers may have created the opportunity, the equity, and the participation, but the students must engage with the learning to make it their own (Kalantzis & Cope, 2004). At High Tech High in San Diego, California, through a collaborative project between the humanities and Spanish classes, teachers tasked the students with doing a project that related to the U.S./Mexico border. That was the only parameter given. Students decided for themselves what topic or area they wanted to research, and then they decided how they wanted to display their research for an audience of the school community as well as for Mexican students they had been conversing with since the start of the unit. Their work, though given an overarching theme, was completely student-driven, and much learning took place (Schwartz, 2018).

No teacher wants to hear, “How much does this count for?” or “How long does this have to be?” or “Does this have to be typed?” These questions show that learning is a task for the teacher, not for the student to learn life skills needed in the real world or for an authentic audience. Teachers need to deliberately connect students to the real world to help them understand the why behind what they do in the classroom. When teachers have created authentic learning experiences well, learning becomes meaningful to the student (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008). Students are committed with a sense of belonging within the learning environment. The opportunity to step out of the classroom either physically or through their mental attitude toward the task gives the students a sense of control over their own learning. This sense of control in turn creates positivity (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, &

Shernoff, 2014). Students gain factual information in the process of problem-solving and can transfer that knowledge to different situations and contexts. They are able to explore and apply their learning as they discover solutions. In the discovery, they learn to define problems and find solutions without being teacher directed (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008). The teacher gives appropriate help as needed, but students rise to the challenge by increasing the skills they need to reach a solution (Shernoff et al, 2014) Not only can the students find solutions, they are able to give reasons and support for those solutions. In doing this, the students increase their motivation and form work-habits to use beyond the classroom. They learn to collaborate and become experts with confidence (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008). In other words, they become motivated and engaged students learning life skills needed after they graduate from high school.

As teachers design work to motivate and engage their students through authentic learning experiences, students realize the importance of what they are doing. With real tasks and real audience, the need to think critically, collaboration and community, and self-directed learning, students feel accomplishment and success knowing they have worked for their own learning purpose, not just for a grade. Often they have shared what they have learned with an audience outside of simply the teacher (Huntley-Johnston et al, 1997). By careful design, teachers have created the “intrinsic fulfillment of meaningful work” for their students through authentic learning experiences.

### **Misconceptions of Authentic Learning Experiences**

As teachers work toward authentic classrooms, they may feel intimidated by certain misconceptions of what ALE's must look like. One misconception is that an ALE has to be all or nothing. Teachers can work toward authenticity in their classroom as a progression. Creating

experiences in a daily lesson can be just as beneficial as creating a semester-long authentic project. Teachers need permission to start small and to use other teaching methods besides ALEs as well (Cronin, 1993). Another misconception about ALE's is that a teacher's lesson plans need to be completely redone to include the authentic experience, but ALE's may be designed from already-created lesson plans. Many teachers subconsciously know that their students need to feel that what they are doing is tied to the real world in some way (Cronin, 1993). Teachers may have already created opportunities for collaboration, critical thinking, differentiation, and student choice. A final myth about ALE's is that they must always be fun, creative, and original. Students may not enjoy the task, the task may have been done by another teacher already, or it may feel ordinary to the teacher, but that does not mean it is not authentic. If it is tied to an authentic task or has an authentic audience, if critical thinking skills are in full play, if the classroom has become a community of learners working together, and if students have choice in their own learning, then it has the potential of pulling students into a real world situation with intrinsic, meaningful work (Cronin, 1993).

Educators and students must understand that "our main task together in the classroom is to attend to learning - not just to learn but to attend to learning, to understand how we learn, and get good at it, and talk about it, perhaps differently than we might other places" (Whitney, 2011 p. 58). When teachers design ALEs and students are motivated to engage, intrinsic learning can take place and break through the stereotype of school as boring and rigid. Authentic learning experiences may not take students out of the actual school setting. Even in the most well designed ALE, teachers must admit to their students that what they do in the classroom may not perfectly mirror the real world, but that does not mean what they learn is not connected to life

skills and assets they will need both now and in the future. An English teacher asks students to read and write because the teacher needs to help the students learn to be “self conscious about those practices” (Whitney, 2011 pg. 57). This is a student choosing to learn. Teaching students to be discerning readers or effective writers also teaches them to become better “users” of these skills (Whitney, 2011). This is a student thinking critically. Creating peer groups so that students can give each other feedback on writing allows them to collaborate and communicate. This is a community of learners. Teachers can use ALE’s to motivate students at a deeper level, to create an atmosphere of authenticity in which learning is attached to life skills needed in the real world. Teachers want students who are not just surviving school by counting seconds, goofing around, or staring out the window; teachers want students who feel motivated to engage in meaningful work. Students cannot feel disconnected from their learning (Shernoff et al, 2014). Instead, teachers can use authentic learning experiences to create connections between the students and their life outside of the school building.

When teachers work to “attend to learning,” they can position their students to find that intrinsic value in learning through authenticity in the classroom. ALE’s become useful tools for learning when students and teachers find their place of identity and understanding together in the classroom, through interaction and relevance. Teachers understand that each student comes from an individual context that teachers can use to empower each student to make choices and connections for their own learning. Teachers become facilitators and guides within the classroom, empowering students to be competent decision-makers. Teachers also create empowerment and motivation by setting high expectations for accomplishment within an ALE (Vetter, 2010).

### **Creating Motivation with Authentic Learning Experiences**

Teachers design many experiences in which students move into the intrinsically meaningful work of ALE's. The best way to clearly understand how ALE's create motivation and engagement is to see authentic learning at work. O'Hanlon (2008) shared how he connected his students with local businesses to create content for websites that the businesses actually used. Students received real world experience for a real audience. Another teacher created a real audience by having her students publish an anthology of their work that they sold to local businesses. The writing became specifically for an audience, causing them to choose topics that made more sense for that broader audience. The editing and proofreading the students had to do took on significant meaning because they knew mistakes would show carelessness and laziness as writers. The class even learned about marketing and letter writing as they got word out that their anthology was for sale. Not only did the students benefit, but so did the community (Putnam, 2001). Another teacher organized her journalism class like an actual newspaper that caused the students to take on the responsibility of all parts of brainstorming, researching, writing, editing, and publishing. The students never worried about their grade because they were too focused on putting out an excellent newspaper for a real audience. These students had a sense of ownership, accomplishment, and pride in their work (Denman, 1995). Another example of an authentic learning experience happened in an English classroom in which the teacher led her students through the process of writing how-to books. Students were able to share their expertise and saw how that expertise helped others learn something new (Huntley-Johnston et al, 1997). In a research project, Powers (2009) explained how he saw students go above and beyond research requirements as they took ownership of their topic and became personally involved.

One student was invited to a private dinner for a Nobel Peace Prize winner through her research project. This student's research led to an extracurricular club at her school that allowed students to meet people making a difference in the world, and to realize how they themselves could make a difference. All of these examples increased student motivation because they incorporated a real problem with a real audience, they allowed the students to use critical thinking and problem solving skills, they took place as a community of learners, and the students had choice in the direction their learning took.

### **Authentic Learning Experiences in the English Classroom**

English curriculum is designed to focus on skills in discussing, reading, researching, and writing (Kahn, 2007; Powers, 2009; Speaker & Speaker, 1991; Vetter, 2010). In any of these skill areas, ALE's can be used to motivate and engage students toward intrinsic learning in meaningful work. Students will find meaning in discussing, reading, researching, and writing when that learning is tied to real world/real audience work, to the need for critical thinking, and to student-directed learning within the context of a community of learners.

Discussion is a skill area in the English curriculum that can be designed as an ALE. To create an authentic learning experience using discussion, the discussion becomes open-ended, not a question and answer recitation. Teachers create an ALE in discussion when they introduce conflict or controversy and allow students to defend or analyze without implying a right or wrong answer. Instead, students use discussion to analyze and assess their information and experiences. Discussions take on the medium that best suits the students and situation; for example, a blog post creates authentic commenting or an online forum allows students to speak openly with people outside of their own classroom (Kahn, 2007). In one study, a group of

students in inner city Chicago began a discussion with local leaders, police, families, and clergy about gun violence that led to service within their community (More Than You, n.d.). Students can be motivated to feel meaningfully engaged as they become personally involved in the contributions they bring to any classroom and to a greater audience. The discussion becomes a sharing of ideas with others through critically thinking, which in turn leads to stronger sense of community with whomever the discussion takes place. Right or wrong no longer becomes the focus; instead, the process of discussing becomes the focus.

Reading is another area in which ALE's can be incorporated. Students become authentic readers when they engage with the words they read and incorporate the new knowledge into a real problem or audience, into the need for critical thinking skills, into work as a community of learners, and into the desire to direct their own learning. What the students do with what they have read can lead to a meaningful authentic learning experience. For those students in inner city Chicago who began a discussion on gun violence, that discussion began after they had read information on the United States constitution. This led them to a connection between "We, the people . . ." and themselves as those very people of whom the constitution spoke. Reading led to authenticity through relationship (More Than You, n.d.). Teachers can lead their students to notice vocabulary or themes or conflicts they have found in their everyday reading that trigger authentic conversations such as the one these students had regarding the Constitution. These conversations can then lead to a heightened awareness of what makes good writing (Speaker & Speaker, 1991) as well as heightened awareness of the needs of others (More Than You, n.d.). An authentic learning experience can then find a fertile place to grow.



Another example of authentic reading is in the Reading Workshop format. Students connect with books because they have choice in what they read, they learn to read critically through mini-lessons and use of mentor texts by the teacher, they use their community in the classroom to share about their books, and reading becomes more real world because students are no longer being forced to read one certain book. They become the directors of what they get to read, hopefully also as lifelong readers well after graduation day (Brunow, n.d.). Reading leads students to critical thinking, interaction, and self-confidence--important life skills needed in the real world.

Researching in an authentic context allows students to have choice in order to develop ownership toward their work. Students feel that ownership as they direct their own learning with the guidance of their teacher. The students in inner city Chicago took ownership of their learning by addressing a need that they were personally connected to in their neighborhood. Their research moved from a textbook on the American Constitution to interviews and personal experience with people of their community (More Than You, n.d.). Instead of using a magazine article as research to satisfy a requirement for a research paper, students realized that the deepest research comes from face-to-face contact, telephone interviews, or travel to historical sites for hands-on research. Learning becomes personal as the students become authorities and confident experts (Powers, 2009). No longer is researching necessary only for a paper for their teacher; researching becomes a part of discovery, teamwork, and critically thinking towards a solution to a real world problem for a real audience.

Writing becomes authentic when it is done for an authentic audience with a real need and a real purpose that leads students to an intrinsic need to use precise wording, details, revisions

and proofreading (Powers, 2009). In one teacher's classroom, the teacher created an authentic writing experience when her students took their study of Benjamin Franklin's aphorisms in *Poor Richard's Almanac* and each wrote a children's book. The students used one of the aphorisms as a basis for their book, explaining it in the form of a digital story for local kindergarteners. The real audience gave the students a real need to critically analyze the aphorism of their choice and to write about it in a way that the kindergarteners would be able to understand (Sztabnik, 2015).

In another example of authentic writing, a teacher had his students research writing contests, choose one, read and understand the manuscript guidelines for submission, adapt one of their own pieces of writing to the contest, and submit it to the contest they had found. The students then learned to use proper MLA citation for their own piece in order to include it in a resume. Many of his students became published writers from this authentic learning experience (Sztabnik, 2015).

Authentic writing also happens when students write about their personal passions in order to share with the school community as a whole or students write a script for a public service announcement that they turn into a video (Sztabnik, 2015). Students understand the need to be effective and responsible communicators when what they write is for an audience outside of their classroom walls. They see the meaningful value of writing as the prerequisite to becoming active members of the world outside of their classroom walls.

In all of these examples, students find themselves a part of a real world problem or working for a real audience. They are defining a problem or asking a question, searching for solutions or designing a product, using critical thinking and inquiry skills, working as a community of learners toward similar goals, and taking ownership and responsibility in their

own learning. In these experiences, students find their voice, find their purpose, and find confidence in hard work. New skills are learned, new interests created, new doors opened that they would not have thought possible had the teacher not designed learning for them to step into. Students leave school knowing the value of intrinsic fulfillment in meaningful work because their teacher valued authenticity in the classroom. By designing ALE's in the classroom that focused on real problems and audiences, on critical thinking skills, on student-directed learning, and on learning in community, teachers prepare their students for life outside the classroom walls. They give their students skills in communication, collaboration, researching, collecting, analyzing, synthesizing and applying knowledge. These are the skills that will lead them to being successful working members of their local and global communities (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008). As one student stated, "We work together to get smart for a purpose, to make our community and our world a better place" (More Than You, n.d.).

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

The participants of this research study were 10th grade students at a small private high school in the Midwest made up of 261 ninth through twelfth grade students. The majority of these participants are from white, middle class families who live in rural communities surrounding the high school. There were 30 females and 27 males in the study. All 10th grade students take the required English 10 class in their sophomore year. This research study took place in an English 10 course that split the students into three sections: one section with 21 students, one with 16, and the third with 20. All sections participated in the same authentic learning experience with the same teacher.

**Materials**

The material used in this research were a survey given to the students at the end of the authentic learning experience. The anonymous survey was created by the researcher using [SurveyMonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com). The survey, located in Appendix A, used a five-level Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The survey was used to determine the intrinsic engagement and value of the ALE for each student through the four characteristics of an ALE. The researcher also conducted semi-structured interviews of eight students selected randomly through a random number generator. See Appendix B for interview questions.

**Design**

A descriptive research design was used for this study. An anonymous survey was given to all 57 students at the end of their authentic learning experience. In order to describe the relationship between each of the characteristics of an ALE and overall student motivation in an ALE, the survey statements focused on the four characteristics of an authentic learning experience. Five statements focused on real world problem/audience, five on the use of inquiry and critical thinking skills, five on being a part of a community of learners, and five on student-directed learning.

The researcher also used a semi-formal interview process to interview eight randomly selected students at the end of the ALE. These interviews used open-ended questions to allow for more than yes or no answers. The purpose of these interviews was to understand more deeply how students were motivated intrinsically within the ALE. The responses to each interview were recorded and then analyzed and sorted according to different themes and categories.

**Procedure**

The 57 students all participated in the same authentic learning experience. The students were divided into ten different teams ranging from 6-8 students in a team. Within their teams, the students worked together to write and layout a newspaper issue to be distributed to the school's student body. Each student was responsible for interviewing someone, focusing the story around the theme of joy in the interviewee's life. In order to put out their issue of the newspaper, each team chose various jobs for each member. The jobs included editor-in-chief, revisers, word choosers, proofreaders, picture editors, and layout editors. The teams had autonomy over which roles each person played in their newspaper team. Together they had two weeks to write and design their issue of the sophomore class newspaper that they titled *20/20 Vision*.

After the ALE was completed, the researcher gave all 57 students the survey through SurveyMonkey.com. The survey received a perfect rate of return because the survey was taken during class time. The researcher was present when the students took the survey with anonymity preserved because no names were associated with answers on the surveys. The semi-structured interviews took place the day after the teams turned in their final newspapers. Interviews took place within this class period while other students had silent reading time. The researcher interviewed each of the eight students to gather a deeper understanding of the feeling of intrinsic motivation and engagement in the work they did for their authentic learning experiences. The answers to the interviews were coded and analyzed immediately following the interviews according to similar words, phrases, and beliefs common in all of their answers.

## Results

After the students completed the authentic learning experience, they anonymously took the survey to determine the extent that they felt intrinsically motivated by the characteristics of an authentic learning experience. The survey focused questions around the four tenets of an ALE: real world/audience, critical thinking, community of learners, and student-directed learning. Eight randomly selected students were also interviewed in order to further clarify the students' level of motivation after the ALE was completed. Their answers were coded and analyzed according to the themes and trends that their answers revealed.

### Survey

In order to answer whether ALE's lead to greater motivation and thus greater engagement for students, the survey was used to show the individual relationship of the four characteristics of an authentic learning experiences to the ALE as a whole. The researcher assigned a value of 5 to each survey answer that showed the best attitude toward an ALE. So if the best attitude answer for a question was "Strongly Agree," then that answer received a 5, if "Mildly Agree" then a 4, if "Neutral" a 3, if "Mildly Disagree" a 2, and if "Strongly Disagree" a 1. These assigned scores of each survey were then added together to get a total number of points for that student's survey. The total possible points available for the 20-question survey was 100. The researcher then collated the answers into the four characteristics of an ALE. Each of those sections of five questions was also totalled for each student. The researcher then had a total number for each characteristic as well as a total number for each survey. This data was used to calculate regression, or the relationship between each characteristic of an ALE to the ALE as a whole.

Figures 1 thru 4 show the regression lines for each of the four characteristics. The regression is measured using R-squared. The R-squared value for each of the characteristics are as follows:

Real World/Audience: 48.4%; Community of Learners: 38.7%; Critical Thinking: 63.3%;

Student Choice: 15.1%. The results of this analysis show how each of the characteristics of an ALE fall in relationship to the ALE as a whole.

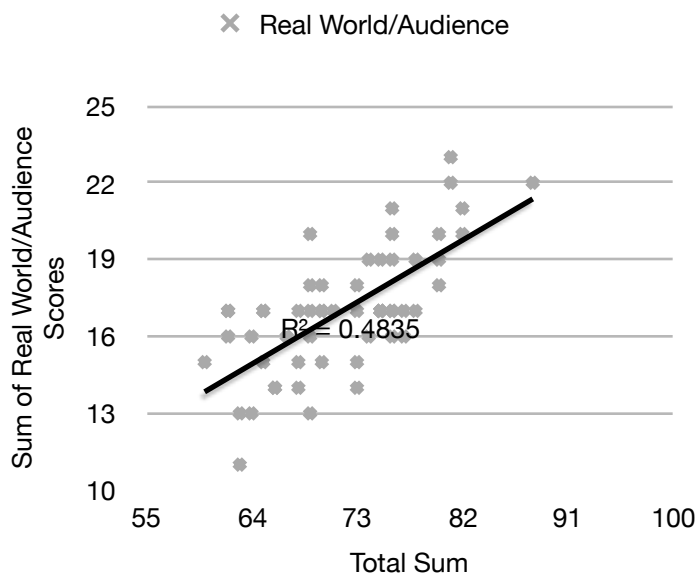


Figure 2. Linear graph showing the correlation between Real World/Audience to the total sum of the survey.

The R-squared value of 48.4% shows that having a real problem and/or a real audience was motivating for the students. It was the second highest correlation of the four characteristics.

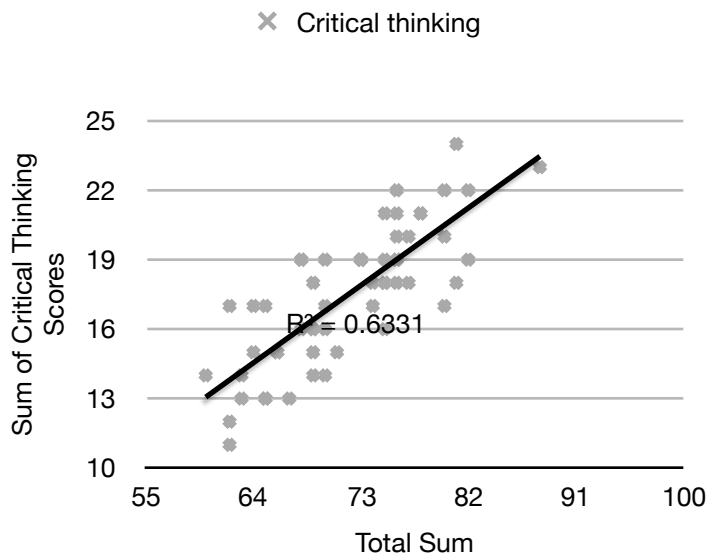


Figure 3. Linear graph showing correlation between Critical Thinking and the total sum of survey.

Critical thinking had the highest R-squared value of 63.3%. This is a very strong correlation to show that students felt motivated when they could use this skill while working on their ALE.

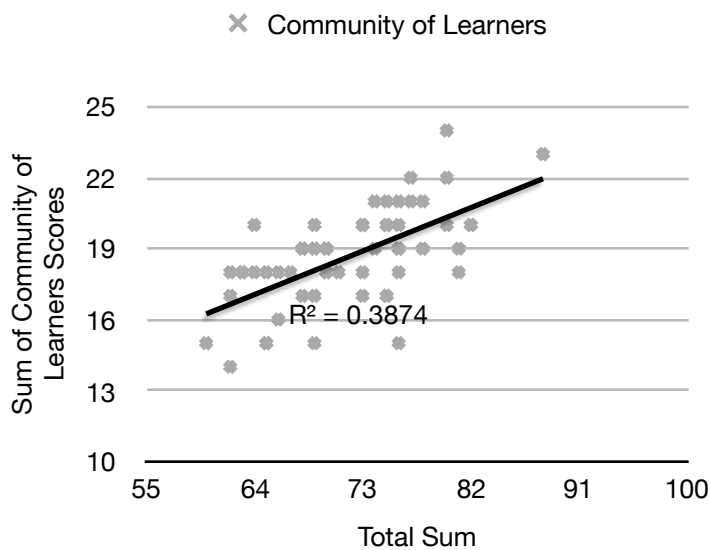


Figure 4. Linear graph showing the correlation between Community of Learners and the total sum of the survey.



Though the R-squared value for Community of Learners was third highest with a value of 38.7%, it does shows a correlation between the motivation of the ALE as a whole and being able to work in community with their classmates.

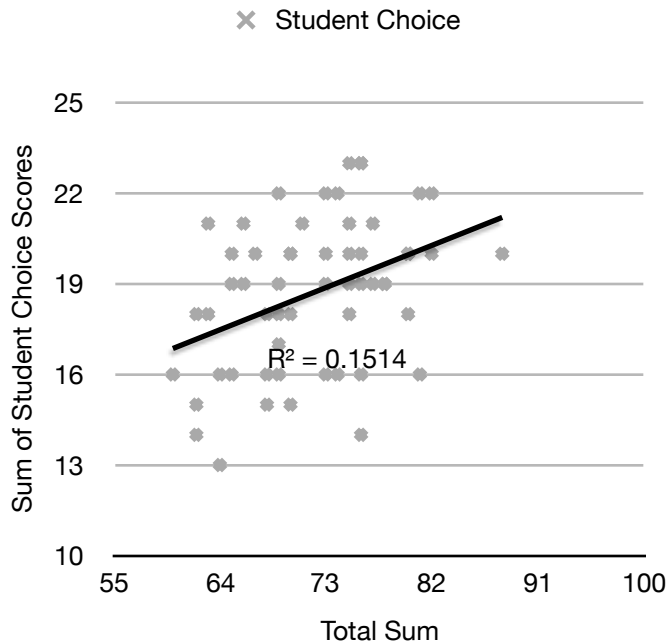


Figure 5. Linear graph showing the correlation between Student Choice and the total sum of the survey.

Student choice in their learning had the lowest R-squared value. The 15.1% is much lower than the other three characteristics and indicated this was the least motivating factor in how the students felt about the ALE. Even as a lower score, 15.4% does show that students were motivated by being able to have choice in their learning, but the lower score suggests that having choice in their work was not as motivating to the students as the other three characteristics.

**Interviews**

This study sought to answer whether authentic learning experiences lead to greater levels of motivation thus leading to greater engagement as students realize the importance of the work

they are doing for their future lives. The interview responses of the eight randomly selected students were overwhelmingly positive in regards to answering this research question. Their answers reflected their attitudes in the four basic characteristics of an ALE.

**Real world/real audience.** The interviews showed that the students enjoyed connecting with a real audience through the newspaper unit. Student C said that reading the articles written by other students “helped me find joy when I’m busy or find joy when life isn’t really going my way” (Student C interview, March 1, 2018). Student H said that they received reassurance from reading other newspaper articles from fellow classmates because they felt that “my life is kind of hard . . . but it made me get reassured that life will get better” (Student H interview, March 1, 2018). This student also said that publishing the newspaper allowed them “to show people reading it that joy comes in many different ways and it’s not the same for everybody” (Student H interview, March 1, 2018).

Having a real audience changed all of the students’ perspectives in how they wrote their article. Student A said that it “changed the way I write when it’s meant to go to everyone instead of just the teacher” (Student A interview, March 1, 2018) Student B said, “I tried harder to make sure I represented myself and the class well” (Student B interview, March 1, 2018).

Having a connection to the real world and real audience changed the amount of effort students put into their work. One hundred percent of the students commented in their own words that the real audience made them work harder to publish a well-written article. Student D said, “I wanted more people to see that I can do better than what I probably have done in the past” (Student D interview, March 1, 2018). Student G responded, “I knew that people I knew were going to read it and it had to be good because I had to put my name on it” (Student G

interview, March 1, 2018). Student B shared that she hoped “that people would know that the sophomore class was a great class” because of their newspaper (Student B interview, March 1, 2018). On the negative side of a having a real audience, only one student, 12.5%, found a downside of having a real audience. Student C stated “I don’t want people to know it’s from me” (Student C interview, March 1, 2018).

**Community of learners.** Eighty-eight percent of the interviewed students found benefits in working as a community to accomplish their project. Student A said that it was “fun to read other people’s stories, where other people find joy in their lives” (Student A interview, March 1, 2018). Student B “loved seeing the creative ideas that the rest of the class did” (Student B interview, March 1, 2018). Student G enjoyed connecting with the greater school community through the newspaper. This student stated, “We got to interview different people and find out about their stories of joy . . . that was really cool” (Student G interview, March 1, 2018). Student F said that he felt “like I put a good amount of effort in for my team” (Student F interview, March 1, 2018), and Student D said, “We each did our part and we got it done” (Student D interview, March 1, 2018). Student H stated “It was nice to have people to hold me accountable” (Student H interview, March 1, 2018). Two of the students agreed that they did the work because they knew that their team was depending on them. Student F said that he “didn’t want to be the weak link that drags everyone else down so you do your job, so I felt responsible for that” (Student F interview, March 1, 2018) while Student E said she knew that “people were counting on me” (Student E interview, March 1, 2018). Student B said that “Everyone did what we assigned them to do, on time, and if someone didn’t get something done, we always helped them. Yeah, I think we really did well together” (Student B interview, March 1, 2018). There

were negative feelings toward working as a team in 37% of those interviewed. Student C said that she didn't feel like her team worked that well together "because half the people on our team don't care," and when asked her least favorite part of the project she simply stated, "Some of my team members" (Student C interview, March 1, 2018). Student G said that "there was some people who didn't really do a lot and some people who did like all of it so it was a mix of people who didn't think they had to do anything and people who knew they had to do everything" (Student G interview, March 1, 2018). Student A shared, "Depending on others, I'm not always sure that they will do their best work and I wonder how that will affect how well my final project will be" (Student A interview, March 1, 2018).

**Critical thinking.** Many of the responses showed that through the process of interviewing people, students critically processed the true meaning of joy. They also had to use their critical thinking and analyzing skills to work through the writing process on their articles. Overall, 87% of the students commented on the need to think critically on this project. The students wanted to use their critical thinking skills to submit a well-written article to their newspapers. Student C said that she "just enjoyed learning about joy . . . because I need to work on that" (Student C interview, March 1, 2018). Student D liked "learning about other people and their stories" (Student D interview, March 1, 2018). Some of the interviewees made specific applications to their own learning needs. Student B said that she "grew from it as a writer, learning how to write more concise how to see things clearer, like grammatically, how to set up things, so yes, think I grew from it" (Student B interview, March 1, 2018). Student H shared that "I don't say I'm very good at school but when I was correcting my paper I realized . . . it's not that bad actually" (Student H interview, March 1, 2018). Student D said that "if you don't do

it right, just don't do it at all. So I have to intentionally do as good as possible" (Student D interview, March 1, 2018). And because of this project, Student H said, "I feel like I can do school a lot better than I am" (Student H interview, March 1, 2018). Student D said that "At the beginning it was a lot of work to do and at the end it wasn't too hard." Student D also stated that he felt he needed to "do it right so you don't get ridiculed for your specific article" (Student D interview, March 1, 2018). Although Student B said that "The least thing I enjoyed would be probably all the revisions we had to do," she also said, "I know it is necessary" (Student B interview, March 1, 2018). Student F shared that "I'm not a very good speller or with grammar, so when I have to do something with a lot of spelling and grammar, it's not my favorite because I have to do a lot of correcting" (Student F interview, March 1, 2018).

**Student-directed learning.** The students had mixed reviews of being the directors of their own learning. In regards to their ability to choose their own topic, Student G said, "I got to know that part of their family and got to know them a lot more" because of whom she interviewed for her article (Student G interview, March 1, 2018). Student F said, "I don't know my stepmom that well yet and I got to know her better" (Student H interview, March 1, 2018). Eighty-seven percent of students said they felt personal satisfaction in their project. Student F said, "I'm happy with my final project" (Student F interview, March 1, 2018), and Student B said, "I can express myself through it" (Student B interview, March 1, 2018). Student E said that he'd "never done anything like this before" (Student E interview, March 1, 2018). Only one of the students interviewed said that he didn't connect with his topic. Student D said that he didn't find personal meaning in the project because "just maybe the story I picked" (Student D interview, March 1, 2018). Three of the students mentioned that the grade played a part in how

they worked on their project and one mentioned that he made sure to do a good job so he could keep playing basketball.

## **Discussion**

### **Overview of the Study**

This study looked at whether authentic learning experiences increased the motivation and thus the engagement of students, leading to a higher intrinsic value for the students in the work that they did. Eight randomly selected students were interviewed and all 57 students involved in the ALE took the anonymous survey after they completed the ALE.

### **Summary of Findings**

When combining the survey results with the results of the interviews, the attitudes of the students toward what makes an authentic learning experience motivating emerged. The interview results along with the survey results showed that having a real audience for which to do real work, being able to use critical thinking skills, and working within a community of learners motivated the students while doing the project. The students interviewed shared that they felt that the newspaper project gave them feelings of satisfaction, accountability, responsibility, and improvement of skills. Students' positive comments about being able to direct their own learning showed that they enjoyed being able to choose topics that connected with the people that they knew and had interest in. Although they stated that because of their ability to direct their learning they were able to get to know other people better and express themselves, 38% of those interviewed also commented that the grade remained an important motivator for them in the doing well on the project. So rather than being motivated by an intrinsic value in the work they did, these students needed the extrinsic reward of a grade to ensure higher quality of

work. This seemed to be reiterated in the survey through the low R-squared value of 15% for Student Choice.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the results of this study, the researcher believes that creating authentic learning experiences in the classroom is very beneficial to students in increasing higher critical thinking skills, working well with others, taking responsibility in their own learning, and showing students that the work they do has an audience and purpose outside of the classroom. Through this project, the majority of the students involved remained motivated and engaged in their work individually and as a team to put out their own issue of the newspaper.

Although the researcher suggests that authentic learning experiences do increase student motivation and thus engagement in the task for intrinsic meaning, some students, for a number of reasons, may still remain somewhat focused on working for a grade or other extrinsic rewards. A well-designed ALE is essential for motivating and engaging all students, especially those who do not enjoy school at all. Without a well-designed authentic learning experience, those students who dislike school and who struggle academically will still resist engaging in the activity. Motivational needs for all students include autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012). These students need clear connections to a purpose outside of the classroom walls in order to find their intrinsic value in learning because they have completely lacked connection to school in the past. Their connection to a purpose must allow these students to see themselves fitting into the world outside of the school walls, so that they can begin to believe that they can achieve. Then they will take up the challenge in the classroom and feel the satisfaction of accomplishment in learning (Beesley et al, 2010). The researcher also suggests

ensuring that all students choose a topic with personal meaning in order to maintain the motivation of student choice in their own learning. Unless students connect personally to their topic, it will continue to remain nothing more than an assignment for their teacher. These unmotivated students must be able to choose learning that matters to them outside of school.

Students need to understand that the framework of an ALE still stands within the context of the school setting. Because some students have never found a true connection to school, this researcher believes it is the teacher that needs to work closely with each student to help each personally connect to the project. Unmotivated students need to be led to their intrinsic value at a slower, more deliberate pace than other students who already feel the purpose of school in their lives. When teachers provide opportunities for active involvement and give appropriate support in problem solving (Shernoff et al, 2014), students feel a sense of commitment and belonging in the classroom instead of passivity, boredom, or anxiety (Beesley et al, 2010).

The teacher must commit to act as a guide to all of the students in the classroom. The researcher believes that having a strong community of learners can help pull these unmotivated students into the project and into the intrinsic value of working as a team, but they must also have a purpose within the community that fits their personality and gifts. If students believe they won't achieve well, they won't take on challenges for fear of another failure (Beesley et al, 2010). As stated by Reeves (n.d), students "are more engaged and learn better when they are challenged, exercise choice, feel significant, receive accurate and timely feedback, and know that they are competent" (p. 10)

Students today need skills in communication, collaboration, researching, collecting, analyzing, synthesizing and applying knowledge. This research study affirms that authentic



learning experiences do have the power to prepare our students for the world outside the classroom walls as long as the design is well-thought out and the teacher walks intentionally beside each student to guide them toward their intrinsic value in meaningful work.

### **Limitations of the Study**

One limitation of this study was in the design of the authentic learning experience. While the researcher incorporated each characteristic of an ALE into the newspaper project, not all students found the real audience of the school's student body motivating. Approximately 10% of the students were not motivated by school or grades in general, so they did not find the audience of the student body a strong enough motivator to increase their engagement or to make the work personally meaningful.

Additionally, further research through multiple ALE's throughout the school year would have yielded more research results for this study. More research and data would give multiple values of R-squared to be used to analyze the correlation of the four characteristics of an ALE to the ALE as a whole more accurately.

Another limitation was the small sample of students in the study. This action research took place with 57 students, 30 girls and 27 boys, in a small high school in the Midwest, the majority from white, middle class families living in rural communities surrounding the high school. With a larger, more diverse sample size of students, a broader range of data would have been available to analyze for a more accurate regression lines using the R-squared values.

Finally, the bias of the teacher was a limitation. The researcher was closely tied to the design and implementation of the project, to the students personally, and to this research study. The researcher also gave the survey in her classroom as the teacher. These circumstances could

have led to bias in how the researcher carried out the study, how she interacted with her students as both students and research participants, in how the students interacted with her as both teacher and researcher, and in how the researcher perceived the results of the study.

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## Appendix A

### Survey of all Students at Completion of Authentic Learning Experience

The survey is grouped to show which questions correlated to which characteristic of the ALE.

Multiple choice answers were: Strongly Disagree, Mildly Disagree, Neutral, Mildly Agree, Strongly Agree.

#### Real World/Audience

1. I am more likely to work hard in class for a project with a real world focus than for a paper and pen test.
2. I have a hard time connecting classwork with the real world.
3. Being assigned a project that mirrors a real world problem/scenario connected to class lessons makes me more likely to do the work required for completion.
4. I am more likely to do more than is required if the audience for my completed work is a person / people other than the teacher.
5. I am more likely to do work in class that only the teacher will see.

#### Critical Thinking

6. I am more likely to memorize information for a test than to work hard on a final project.
7. I get a sense of accomplishment from putting a lot of work into a project or solution.
8. I get energized when my teacher gives me a chance to discover for myself rather than giving me the answer.
9. I dislike when the teacher makes me find an answer myself.
10. I am more likely to remember information if I have to find the answer or solution myself.

#### Community of Learners



11. I am more likely to slack off if I'm working in a group.
12. I am more likely to work hard on a project if I feel like my project matters to my community.
13. I am more likely to complete a project if others are depending on me to do my part.
14. I am more likely to strive to find answers if my classmates are working to find answers too.
15. Working with others on a project does not help me learn at all.

#### Student Choice

16. Having a choice in the topic of my project makes me merely likely to do the work involved in completing the project.
17. The most important factor in determining if I will complete a project is if it is personally meaning and relevant to my life.
18. It is part of my teacher's job as an instructor to provide motivation for me to want to do assignments for class.
19. I consider doing activities in class a waste of time unless I can make some personal connection with or learn a lesson from the activity.
20. I am more likely to do my best work on a project if the teacher assigns the topic to me.

## Appendix B

### **Semi-structured Interview Questions of Eight Students at the End of the Authentic Learning Experience**

1. What did you enjoy the most about this project?

Follow Up / Expanding Questions:

- a. Do you feel like what you have done in class has personal meaning for you? Explain.
  - b. Did how you did your work change because of the audience/reason you were doing it for? Explain.
  - c. Were you proud of the work you did? Why/Why not?
  - d. Did you feel like your team worked well together to accomplish the newspaper?
  - e. Did you feel a sense of responsibility to put out the paper?
2. Looking back at the project, what was your main motivation in completing it?
3. What did you enjoy the least about this project?