

Understanding Engagement in Class: Learning through Occupations

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Keywords: Occupations, callings, student engagement, teacher engagement, class unit design.

Abstract: Student engagement includes skills engagement, participation engagement, emotional engagement, and performance engagement. Dewey (1916) and Quay (2017)'s research has focused on teaching students' knowledge through occupations and callings, which could improve students' as well as teachers' engagement. This article reports a unit plan on learning through occupations. It explains the design of the unit plan first and then evaluates it through five perspectives.

1. Introduction

Education is about the reconstruction and reorganization of meaningful experience to improve individuals' abilities for future experience (Dewey, 1916). Teachers are undertaking significant roles in organizing and building students' line-time and life-time experience. According to Dewey (1916), students are not only students, but also have many callings/occupations. Inspired by Dewey' idea (1916), *education through occupations*, I try to understand who my students are, and what experience they want to have from schooling. Instead of focusing on content teaching, I try to care more about students' engagement and individual development. I start to reconsider what students are being, doing and knowing in school. I find learners' schooling proposes should not be limited to content or knowledge that we normally assess them. They can have more positive reflective and aesthetic experience from schooling. The main purpose of education is reconstructing and reorganizing people' experience and improve their life understanding (Dewey, 1916). A teacher-centered and one-way teaching method should be altered. In this essay, I try to combine teachers' will and students' will together and plan a history unit to solve teacher-student shared problem and improve both engagements. I design two activities within this class and both of them are students-centered and group work. In the first part of this essay, I explain the unit plan. And then I evaluate this unit plan from five perspectives, understanding my student, aesthetic and respective experience, inquiry and backward design, differential instruction and shared problem and purposes. The unit plan is mostly about organizing two activities to engage my students as well as me.

2. A brief explanation about my unit plan

This history unit is designed for year 9 students (around 17) in China. Based on two interactive activities, students are prospected to share and understand the causes and consequences of WWII. Students are major participants of class, so their desired learning achievements set directions for my class designs (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Although it is guided by national standards that students should know major events of WWII and its causes and consequences, students' diverse needs, interests, occupations, and previous achievements have been considered during my class activities design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005; Quay, 2017). I am teaching year 9 students, but they are not limited to students. Inspired by Quay (2017) and Dewey' idea (1916), teaching students history knowledge through occupations is achieved in this history unit and the learning is driven by creations for assessment purposes (Quay, 2017). Students around 17 are going to make an important future choice at the end of their year 9 study. They will experience college entrance exam after they finish their high school study. This exam is vital for Chinese students because if they fail in this exam, they will not have access to higher education. Most of my students study hard for passing this important exam

because my school is famous for high admission rates. Passing this exam also means that students need to make an important decision about their career. They need to choose one subject and keep on learning for 4 years. Consequently, it is vital for them to build a rich repertoire of occupational experience before making choices (Quay, 2017). After having this history class, students are expected to improve abilities through embedded knowledge and skills in designed contexts and build a repertoire of occupational experience.

There are two activities designed to engage students in learning and to build up their understanding of WWII. I made this decision choice for Knowing and Doing to be understood through the Being (Quay, 2015). The first activity is named 'research and poster design'. In this activity, students need to work as a team and do research on WWII' causes and consequences. They need to gather information and evaluate information together. After information gathered and evaluated, they are required to design a poster up to 500 words. I design this group activity because I think teamwork could develop a deeper sense of belonging among students according to Quay' physical education projects (2012). High-level teamwork could motivate project completion and teammate respect; and students develop belongings to the team by giving support and helping (Quay, 2012). Also, teamwork entrusts students with different callings, which means they have a variety of occupations within this group (Dewey, 1916). In 'research and poster design activity', researcher, leader, designer, writer, team player, editor and compilers of information work together to create their understanding of WWII' causes and educational, economic, political, environmental and social consequences. After designing a poster, students are asked to present their poster to other groups and give peer feedback between different groups. In this activity, they listen to different perspectives about the topic and evaluate their understanding. Students work as the leader, presenter, information organizer, feedback writer in the group work. Self-reflection and peer feedback are the main evidence of study outcome.

3. Evaluation of the unit plan

3.1 Understanding of my students

We usually consider students as students only, but they have many occupations in reality (Quay, 2015, p. 6). Children are on the way to adulthood so being a student is one transit point of their adulthood journey. Education is a preparation for the future and self-realization is more important than knowledge and information (Quay, 2015, p. 10). Students are not just student because everyone is a member of other units, which means they have different occupations/callings (Dewey, 1916, p. 359). In my class, students have different occupations and different personality, but they do have something in common. They are all around 17 years old, and they love the internet, sports, social life and games. Some of them have a clear version of their future but some of them are still uncertain about their future choices. Some students love playing instruments and some are interested in make-up skills. They are others' friends, parents' child, siblings, team players or fans of some pop stars. Children at this age care others' opinions and prefer group work. Quay (2015) encourages education through occupations, which means teachers need to be aware of learners' other occupations. Understanding learners' occupations/ callings are of necessary when teacher want to organize knowledge and information effectively (Quay, 2015). Every occupation undertakes a meaningful framework and has a purpose, so the occupation is considered as a way of being, a way of knowing and a way of doing (Quay, 2015). In my history unit, I arrange two activities. Based on children' callings and interests, I give an information searching task for them. They are expected to make full use of the internet, books, news and other resources for gathering information, which is one of the most frequent things they do every day. They love gathering information and sharing information. So, in this activity, children have different roles within a group of five, and they act as researcher, leader, poster designer, writer, team player, compilers of information or editor in this team. They can conduct research using various resources and evaluate the accuracy of the resources. After information gathered, they need to design a poster about WWII causes and consequences. Education is not only about knowing knowledge, but it is also connected with being and doing (Quay, 2015, p. 32). In this activity, they know the research,

evaluation, group collaboration skills through *doing and being*. In the second activity, students are given a chance to present their poster. They have callings like leader, presenter, information organizer, feedback collector. This activity gives them some experience of other occupations and builds up a relationship with their understanding of their future career. According to a group presentation, they can articulate and illustrate their understanding of the given topic and listen to different perspectives. Based on what they are doing and being, they know how to prepare presentations and give feedback to others. More importantly, they learn to evaluate problems from different perspectives.

3.2 Aesthetic and Respective experience

Education is not fixed. Dewey (1916) argue that education must grow and change with the development of a democratic community. People have both aesthetic and respective experience/feeling. Reflective thinking is starting by a troubled or confused situation and ending up with a unified, resolved situation (Quay, 2015, p 26). It is individuals' reflection of future and past. Reflective experience directs people' activity and action with foresight and past revision (Quay, 2015, p 26). Aesthetic experience is completely merged in the immediate wholeness of the experience (Dewey, 1934). Aesthetic experience is being-in-the-world- experiencing experiencing (Quay, 2015). From a learner' perspective, how they feel during my history class is aesthetic experience and what history class gives them is a respective experience. These two kinds of experience represent two kinds of thinking, but they are all achieved through being, doing and knowing. Quay (2015, p. 10) define the time at present as 'life-time'. The life-time experience explains what is happening right now adequately. What people are doing is future-oriented (Heidegger, 2010). Because of this, what students learn in one class should give them both life-time and line-time experience. As a teacher, I need to leap ahead of them (Heidegger, 2010). Based on students' reaction, I discover most of my students want to enter top university and develop their interest further in the university, so I decide to organize curriculum and pedagogy to support their short time goals. My activities are closely connected with official guideline because I take students' great exam pressure into consideration. As Heidegger (2010) said 'being- ahead- of oneself- already-being-in-the-world', having schooling for learners is an involvement in shaping life. The history class designed for students is a 40-minute aesthetic and reflective experience of their life-time but it may influence their line-time experience. According to my aesthetic and affective experience, I would like to encourage students to experience different occupations and doing a group project because doing being knowing is shaping their future and domestic life. Those two activities could reconstruct and reorganize individuals' experience in a meaningful way.

3.3 Inquiry-based and backward unit design

Teaching aims at influencing someone else's lives. There are two famous unit frameworks: inquiry-based units (Wilson & Wing Jan 2009) and backward design units (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). The difference between forwarding and backward unit frameworks is directional logic. I adopt backward as well as inquiry-based design idea and get students involved in the teaching process. First of all, I identify students' desired results. As Wiggins and McTighe (2005) argue, after identifying students' specific desired results, class content, method and activities are more likely to achieve the desired output. It is suggested that setting clear short-term and long-term goals could achieve a more effective transfer of learning (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). My class identifies a specific learning destination first and it leads the pathway to the end. Learners in my class are eager to master history knowledge because of the exam pressure. Based on students' reflection, they also want to improve their group collaboration skills, evaluation skills, and research skills during schooling, which has a lifelong influence on their life. Because of their need, individual work and teacher-centered approach are not suitable for achieving their goals. After that, I think like an assessor and organize student-centered and group work activities for them (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Teacher has the responsibility to prioritize and make the content interesting and useful (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). To engage all of my students, I want them to create a poster creatively. They could make full use of their imagination to design their own work. Also, the designed poster and presentation could be assessment evidence. Based on that, I

design two group activities to equip students with the needed knowledge and skills (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). I make a backward unit planning because I think it makes students as well as teachers' goals specific and concrete (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005). As the causes and consequences of WWII are a series of answers and people may have various perspectives towards it, I don't give standard answers to this topic. Instead, students listen to other groups' investigation and evaluate information by themselves.

Inquiry learning is also implemented in this history class. I post a topic for students so that they are provided with an opportunity to pose questions and gather information in the inquiry process (Wilson & Wing, 2009). However, I don't give students choices about key questions for investigation because most of the students are learning for the college entrance exam and they have to know the causes and consequences of WWII (shared inquiry). I choose a structured inquiry and give them the focus of this investigation, which is called 'teacher selection and organization' by Wilson and Wing (2009). After students knowing learning targets, two group activities are designed to assist them to organize the new information and skills so that students could form their concepts and understanding about the topic (Wilson & Wing, 2009). I don't provide extra resource and organize the Finding Out experiences. Instead, students are encouraged to use different sources of information and assume responsibility for organizing information, which means poster design is student choice (Wilson & Wing, 2009). In presentation activity, students have a chance to connect different ideas and assess their outcomes (knowledge and skills) (Wilson & Wing, 2009). In inquiry learning, students understand what they need to do so they perform better in class.

3.4 Differential instruction

Students are different from one to the other so the class design should consider content differentiation. Teachers can vary the complexity of content, learning activities, and studying outcomes methods through instruction (Taylor, 2015). In my school, every class has one teacher and because of this, I divide our students into 4 groups and arrange the same activities for each group. Team members are familiar with each other and they are undertaking different roles in the group activities based on their interests. In UbD framework, it emphasizes *individual differences* and *a number of activity choices* (Wilson & Wing, 2009). In my history class, all students don't have extra activity choice, but they could choose their interested perspectives to investigate. Hereby, groups could get extra bonus if they finish an extra task. If students complete compulsory requirement and also represent their understanding of China's role in WWII, the group could get an extra credit. The bonus may encourage group cooperation and collaboration.

3.5 Shared problem and shared purposes

When whole class is doing similar tasks together, they usually have a shared inquiry. The shared experience creates a strong bond between students and promotes the exchange and development of ideas (Wilson & Wing Jan, 2009). Students are required to learn the causes of key historical events for the preparation of the end of year 9 examination. They are also required to analyze and corporate different sources to finish the task. During the activity, students meet shared problems. For instance:

- Where do we find resources of the topic?
- How to summarize information and build up an understanding of the causes and consequences of WWII through research and team collaboration?
- How will we evaluate the accuracy of resources?
- How do we present the poster?
- How to analyze the causes and consequences of WWII through listening to others' presentation?
- How to provide constructive feedback to their peers?

To solve this problem, they research by using the internet and other sources to gain an understanding on the topic and then conduct a poster; also, they listen to the class presentation to learn different perspectives from other students and provide feedback to others and receive peer feedback to deepen comprehension on the topic. This doing process improve students' skills and abilities. Those skills are long-term development goals and will pose a positive influence on students' line-time knowledge and

understanding. It also can be explained as ‘integrated inquiry’ (Wilson & Wing Jan, 2009). Students’ understanding of the world is improved not only by shared experienced but also by using a different resource to find information (Wilson & Wing Jan, 2009). In this class design, I try to combine teachers’ will with students’ will and keep a balance between them. The shared purpose and shared problems could be better solved if teachers listen to learners’ voice.

4. Conclusion

Children have many occupations/callings (Dewey,1916). Having education is not only for knowing knowledge or achieving high scores but more importantly, learning is for understanding lives. When I design my unit, I think from students’ perspective and try to figure out how to prepare student useful line-time and life-time experience. I want to give them both aesthetic and reflective experience and I think two activities could do it. Students will feel more engaged about history classes. A shared inquiry could realize through schooling. It is not a perfect unit plan, and it doesn’t give students choices about tasks. However, it is suitable for implication in reality after considering my students’ needs and curriculum requirement.

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Appendix

CREATIVE LEARNING UNIT TEMPLATE

<p>UNIT NAME & DESCRIPTION: this is evocative of being-doing-knowing, not just a curriculum topic, and describes for all involved how the activities work together meaningfully as a unit</p> <p><u>Year 9 History: Causes and consequences of WWII and China's role within it</u></p> <p>Description: This unit is designed for year 9 students (around 18) in China. It draws together interest in group poster making, sharing the causes and consequences of WWII and China's role within it to classmates. This history class will be supporting the year 9 capabilities program by researching, analyzing, designing, producing and presenting a poster to educate the whole year level. You can choose an interested perspective (for instance, educational, economic, political, social, environmental perspective) and work with a team in the role of class leader, team leader, researcher, designer, writer, team player, compilers of information, editor, presenter. You will conduct research about the causes or consequences of WWII and if you feel it is not challenge enough, you can do extra research in China's role within WWII. The finished poster will be presented at the end of this week attended by whole class member. The poster will also double up as a revision document for the end of semester assessment.</p> <p>Suggested topics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The causes of WWII - The educational consequences of WWII - The economic consequences of WWII - The political consequences of WWII - The social consequences of WWII - The environmental consequences of WWII - China's role in WWII <p>*Extra credit for groups who include China' role in WWII</p>	
<p>UNIT Shared Problem > this establishes the unit and carries it forward, relevant to and understood by all involved</p> <p>We are required to learn the causes of key historical events and WWII' consequences for the preparation of the end of year 9 examination. Students are also required to develop critical thinking and information summarize ability through presenting historical events influences and causes (this will support the teachers in the year 9 program).</p>	
<p>Activity Name: <i>this is evocative of being-doing-knowing and makes sense as an activity of this unit</i></p> <p>Gather up information and conduct a poster</p>	<p>Activity Name:</p> <p>Poster presentation and peer feedback</p>

<p>Activity Shared Problem: <i>this establishes the activity and carries it forward, is relevant to and understood by all involved, and is a connected with the larger unit shared problem</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Where do we find resources of the topic? -How to summarize information and build up an understanding on the causes and consequences of WWII through research and team collaboration? -How will we evaluate the accuracy of resources? 	<p>Activity Shared Problem:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -How do we present the poster? -How to analyze the causes and consequences of WWII through listening to others' presentation? -How to provide constructive feedback to their peers?
<p>Activity Shared Purpose: <i>this establishes the unit and enables the end to be understood by all involved, is connected with the larger unit shared purpose, and articulates how activity success is assessed</i></p> <p>Your team will make full use of 'WWII events' resource we gave you before and gather extra useful information from books, clips, articles and other resources to make sure you can build up a well-rounded understanding of chosen topic. Your team will need to brainstorm how to organize the poster. Then you will work together to design your creative poster.</p>	<p>Activity Shared Purpose:</p> <p>Your team will be given 5-7 minutes to present your poster in front of the whole class. The poster must include your understanding of WWII causes and consequences. We all need to listen to other groups' presentations and learn from different perspectives and give constructive group feedback.</p>
<p>Expectations for Being: this is who people are expected to be in this activity, connecting problem and purpose</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Each student has a different role within a group of five <researcher, leader, reader, designer, writer, producer, compilers of information, editor>. 	<p>Expectations for Being:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Each student has different roles within a group. <Leader, presenter, organizer (information), team player, listener, teacher, and writer (feedback)>.
<p>Expectations for Doing: this is how people are expected to connect problem and purpose through enacting this activity (a list of criteria)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Locating 5 primary sources -Students as a team work collaboratively to research on the topic of their choice -Students are able to evaluate the accuracy of the resources 	<p>Expectations for Doing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Students are able to articulate and illustrate their understanding on the topic through giving an 5-7 minutes group presentation in class -Sharing understanding with others -Presentation structure (organization and articulation)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Summarizing the significance of the key causes and consequences of the WWII -Design an academic poster of 500 words -Sentence construction (spelling and grammar) should be applied carefully so that meaning is as clear as possible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Students are able to listen to other groups' presentation respectfully. -Students are able to analyze information from different perspectives and provide constructive feedback.
<p>Expectations for Knowing: this is the knowledge people are expected to need (know/learn) in order to achieve this activity, connecting problem and purpose</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -How to analyze and evaluate information -The causes and consequences of WWII, participates, and important events. -China's participation in WWI -Group collaboration skills -Research skills -Evaluation skills 	<p>Expectations for Knowing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Different perspectives about the causes and consequences of WWII -China's participation in WWII -How to prepare for and make presentations as a team -How to give effective feedback to other teams based on presentations
<p>UNIT Shared Purpose > this establishes the unit by aligning various purposes into one shared expression, enables the end to be understood by all involved, and articulates how unit success is assessed</p> <p>Poster on chosen topics will be completed and presented in class in order to build up students' research and analysis skills, enhance students' knowledge of the causes and consequences of key historical events, and scaffold students for the preparation of end of year 9 examination.</p>	