Student Engagement and the Negotiation of Joint Enterprise in a Project-Based Learning Course

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Abstract: This ethnographic study examines the nature of student engagement in a simulation of the Supreme Court of the United States embedded in a project-based Advanced Placement American Government and Politics course in an urban high school. Analysis of videotaped group interactions over the course of the unit was used to characterize *what* students engaged in and *how* student engagement and joint enterprises evolved through negotiation over time.

Keywords: Project-based learning, engagement, Advanced Placement, social studies education

Major issues addressed

A number of researchers have promoted project-based learning (PBL) as particularly useful for engaging students' interests and supporting connections between school learning and the practices of disciplinary fields (e.g. Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Lo & Tierney, 2017; Tierney et al., 2020). Participation in the work of those domains requires that students learn a discipline-specific set of roles, goals, and norms alongside the knowledge practices (Engle & Conant, 2002). Together, these form *figured worlds:* "socially and culturally constructed realm[s] of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 52). At the same time, PBL courses exist in the social contexts of schooling and are thus part of other figured worlds including a) the figured world of peer social relationships and b) how, in school settings, students orient themselves in relation to the roles, goals, and practices of "doing school," including completing assignments, meeting deadlines, and avoiding teacher sanction (Esmonde, Takeuchi, and Radakovic, 2011).

Potential significance

Project-based learning is based on the assumption that learning while solving complex problems in the domain of study will result in superior retention and flexibility of what is learned. For this to occur, however, students must be supported in learning the knowledge practices of the domain in the context of their use. Students must be *productively* engaged in the domain, not just "playing at" being lawyers. The findings of our study have important implications for the investigation of engagement. Acknowledging multiple and sometimes competing joint enterprises, and the figured worlds which animate them, contributed to our understanding of why and how students engage, and to how multiple goals emerge and are managed in small group PBL contexts. A clearer understanding of these processes can inform both theories of engagement and motivation and the practice of project-based learning.

Theoretical approaches

Our study of small groups' engagement in project-based learning began with the idea that the simulation project, by design, requires students to negotiate the "potentially conflicting and competing" values, goals, and knowledge practices of multiple laminated figured worlds (Jurow, 2005). To study engagement in this context, we adopted Wenger's (1998) term *joint enterprise* to identify what groups considered to *be* the activity in which they were engaged at any given time.

Methodological approaches

The data for this analysis were collected during the final unit or "cycle" of the experimental, project-based Advanced Placement (AP) Government and Politics course at a diverse, urban public high school in a large metropolitan district in the northwestern U.S. The cycle, Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS), introduced the structure and function of the U.S. Supreme Court. Students were assigned to groups by the teacher to be either "lawyer teams" or "justices" in the hearing. Teams had six class sessions (approximately six hours of small group work) to prepare their cases prior to the mock trial, plus the week of spring break which fell between the two weeks. Two "lawyer teams" were the focal groups for this analysis, one from each of two sections of the course taught by the same teacher, Mr. Nathan, a white male in his third year of teaching and his first year working with the PBL curriculum for this course. Data used in this analysis included video recordings of all small group

work completed as part of the mock hearing project over two weeks, brief interviews with students immediately following group activity, interviews with the teacher, and artifacts including handouts and PowerPoints used by the teacher during this cycle. Video and audio records were transcribed verbatim. Coding began with an initial set of code categories based on our research questions. Coding was iterative and collaborative, with video and transcript presented simultaneously and research group members proposing new codes and code categories, negotiating codes and their definitions, and co-producing analytic comments and memos. The group was considered the unit of analysis, and episode boundaries marked significant shifts in activity.

Major findings

In our data corpus, we found that students were engaged in both long-term (project-length) and short-term joint enterprises. These enterprises and their goals arose in the figured worlds in which groups' activity occurred in this PBL classroom. Sometimes joint enterprises were situated in a single figured world (e.g., Peer World or the world of Doing School). Because of the official task was a simulation of the Supreme Court in this project-based class, the bulk of the groups' joint enterprises existed in the laminations of multiple worlds: Legal World, Doing School, Peer World. Groups, therefore, had to negotiate the sometimes-competing goals of the various worlds in which they conducted their activity, and these negotiations were influenced by the positional identities of individuals in those various figured worlds, as well as the values and norms of those worlds.

The nature of student engagement changed for members of the student groups depending on the availability of roles in different kinds of activity. We argue that positional identity in the classroom and school played a role in affording or constraining opportunities to influence the group's joint enterprise. The teacher's role was important in making goals of activity explicit, but these were still negotiated by the groups in practice. Students' social and academic status clearly afforded or constrained the opportunities to influence the group's activity in the ongoing negotiation of the project. Finally, access to the domain and individual differences in domain knowledge played a role in defining and holding members accountable to productive disciplinary engagement within Legal World. But because of the presence of laminations, knowledge from other domains (i.e., Doing School) was often inserted into discussion in ways that conflicted with the disciplinary norms of Legal World.

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