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Going public: authentic teaching and learning through publication

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Going Public: Authentic Teaching and Learning through Publication

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Abstract

As the burdens of high-stakes testing and teacher evaluation systems move toward more quantitative measures, it is even more pressing to preserve the sanctity of creative teaching and learning endeavors. It is with this in mind that I strive to present a collaborative, project-based learning experience that is at once authentic and aligned to nationally recognized standards for excellence in teaching and learning.

Over the last two years, I've taken on a more substantial leadership role in my school community as the Internal Coordinator for a re-accreditation process that culminated in December, 2012. Of the many things I learned in the process, one that resonates is the need for educators to maintain a solid, unwavering focus on our most primary concern: students and their learning. While legislators and educational policy makers purport to do just this, everyday educators recognize the grim reality— that if we allow ourselves, creative curriculum endeavors may very well fall by the wayside in lieu of curricula driven by standardized assessments that have little to do with student learning or teacher effectiveness.

By engaging in authentic classroom teaching and learning, educators can undermine damaging trends. The annual student publication project I present in this project exemplifies such efforts. Moreover, I intend to demonstrate that sharing our own experiences in instructional inquiry and practice as teachers with a larger audience by writing for publication is as gratifying and impactful as the work we do within the walls of our classroom.
Table of Contents:

I. **Rationale: A Self-study Process** ................................................................. p. 4

II. **A Dilemma: High-stakes Testing and Teacher Evaluations** ......................... p. 8

III. **A Response: Creative Curriculum** ............................................................. p. 16

IV. **Manuscript Submitted to English Journal, May 2013** .................................. p. 17

V. **New Ways of Thinking and Learning** .......................................................... p. 31
   a. **Right Brain Thinking**
   b. **Authentic Learning and Social Constructivism**
   c. **Authentic Learning Experiences and Authentic Assessment**
   d. **Project-based learning**
   e. **Publication Projects**

VI. **Professional Extensions** ............................................................................... p. 43
   a. **Teacher Publication**
   b. **Teacher Voices**
   c. **Teacher Collaboration**

VII. **Reflections and Implications** ...................................................................... p. 50
Rationale: Realizing the Pressing Need for Creative Instruction

When I think of what makes a high school successful, many things come to mind; I think of myriad curricular and extracurricular opportunities, athletics, arts, and more. Sleepy Hollow High School certainly fits this mold. Sleepy Hollow High School is a unique secondary school in the Tarrytown Public School District. Located in Sleepy Hollow, New York, a village in Southern Westchester, the school serves 850 ethnically and socioeconomically diverse students. Of the major ethnic groups that comprise the student body, 58% identify as Hispanic or Latino, 32% identify as white, and 7% identify as African American. 35% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch (city-data.com). According to the Annual New York State Student Performance Report, 18% of Sleepy Hollow High School students are considered limited English proficient (3rd highest in state outside of NYC), and 43% are considered economically disadvantaged. (See appendix A for a full school description).

Sleepy Hollow High School offers its students a variety of academic programs and classes. Additional support programs are provided for ELL, immigrant and struggling students. Overall, the district works to serve its diverse learning population by taking advantage of innovative teaching practices and partnerships with the community at large. Historically, the school has been committed to creating a unique and personalized high school experience for students. We have impressive school spirit, an historic flair, innovative clubs, and committed teachers. We have an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse yet highly unified student body. We have strong athletic teams, prize-winning
artists and scientists, creative writers, and young social activists. We are a proud community.

But what makes a school great? What distinguishes a banal educational experience from an indelible one? The answer, in my opinion, is vision- the collective vision to improve, grow, progress, and provide. And this is exactly the purpose of a self-study process. In the fall of 2011, Sleepy Hollow High School began an 18-month re-accreditation process through the Middle States Association. The initial steps involved completing a comprehensive self-study of the school’s organizational capacity and academic programs. This required the participation and involvement of the entire faculty, student body, and community of stakeholders. Surveys and committee work rendered a new school mission, Beliefs, Profile of Graduates, and four organizational and instructional objectives (see appendix B). As a staff, we: collaboratively developed and implemented a shared vision and mission; collected and used data to identify goals, assess organizational effectiveness, and promote organizational learning; created a plan to implement plans to achieve these goals; and created plans to promote continuous and sustainable implementation and to monitor and evaluate progress and revise plans.

As the ELCC Standards highlight, leadership is the “development, articulation, and stewardship of a vision of learning.” As a leader of a visionary endeavor, I’m beginning to better understand this concept. And while the purpose of Middle States Accreditation is to build a program that is constantly reflective and improving, I can’t help but throw a pragmatic (and frustrated) nod at reality. My deep involvement as a leader in the process illuminated broader concerns for our field, and a clear tension emerged between what educators are mandated to do and what they know is best for learning. Briefly, our vision
for a better school future is compromised by the realities of public education as high-stakes testing and the fear of public scrutiny disempower and undermine educators and threaten to take the driver’s seat, leaving “vision” as the lonely passenger (or a helpless captive in the trunk.)

Recent legislative changes regarding teacher performance reviews in New York State are partly to blame. Annual Professional Performance Reviews (otherwise known as APPR), a new system adopted by NY State for evaluation of teacher performance.

According to an article published in the *New York Times* in January, 2013:

Under a 2010 state law, which was passed by the Legislature in a bid to win nearly $700 million in competitive grants from the federal government’s Race to the Top program, the state was required to create a new teacher evaluation system. The old system, which everyone agreed was terrible, relied on spotty observations by administrators and found an overwhelming majority of teachers “satisfactory” whether or not they were performing in the job. The new system rates teachers as “highly effective,” “effective,” “developing” or “ineffective.” Those rated as “ineffective” for two consecutive years can be dismissed through an expedited process. The state law requires that 60 percent of a teacher’s score be based on subjective measures like classroom observation and 20 percent based on students’ academic improvement on state tests. Another 20 percent is to be based on locally approved measures of student achievement, to be decided with the union.

Under this new legislation, teachers’ evaluations are at the mercy of their students’ test scores. What’s more, there is a real threat to the nature of curriculum and instruction. If an educator has ten months to prepare a student to pass, or master, an exam, creative curricular endeavors are at stake. Many teachers lament that they have had to forego more time-consuming yet engaging projects and activities in order to spend more time preparing students for final exams, state tests, and school-wide performance initiatives. This school year alone, the impact of APPR was apparent from the first day of classes: “We spent the first two weeks doing pre-assessments,” remembers one student. “We didn’t even start to
do the real work until the end of September.” In my own classroom, I spent more time grading and organizing pre-assessments, figuring out performance bands, student learning objectives (SLOs) and rectifying roster issues that could be problematic for my evaluation.

My story is by no means unique. Teachers across New York State found their jobs drastically changed this school year. “It’s just not the same job,” says one colleague. “I used to spend time planning curriculum. Now I’m arguing with administration to fix my roster so the students who no longer come to school won’t count against me.” We’ve created a climate of fear that discourages those entering the workforce. If we deny teachers the opportunity to do what they do best, i.e., design and implement curriculum based on student-need, the entire profession is compromised.

Educators today are hypersensitive to the changes we are undergoing as a field, in part because accountability has become synonymous with humiliation. We are constantly fighting the media by publishing editorials defending our, dare I say it... art. We must constantly defend our professionalism, because our “performance” is being evaluated according to debasing, inaccurate, and misleading numerical scores that are incapable of reflecting the complexity or ultimate value of teaching or learning. And all the while, vision is losing oxygen. How can we provide creative teaching and authentic learning when we are busy “teaching” students how to effectively take tests that will be used to determine our worth and, perhaps, right to remain in our field? How can we effectively collaborate and develop professionally when we are spending an exorbitant amount of time checking rosters, accounting for time in and out of class, writing SLOs, and predicting hypothetical growth? This is certainly not what I envisioned when I decided to join the ranks.
The Middle States accreditation process holds schools accountable for adhering to a vision that is “shared and supported by all stakeholders.” Keeping this in mind and preserving the personalization and breadth of experience that make our school unique was at the forefront of our planning at Sleepy Hollow High School. We asked, “How do we comply with state mandates, reach benchmarks for improvement, raise standardized test scores and still preserve what we have worked so hard to build?” We strongly considered the current educational climate and needs of the students when drafting our new school objectives. While the first two objectives are closely tied to meeting test score benchmarks, the 3rd and 4th objectives (see appendix C) speak to our vision. These objectives highlight and champion cultural literacy, civic duty, citizenship, novel programs, critical thinking, personalization, and a varied high school experience. Most important, these objectives call for creative curricular endeavors and a commitment on the part of educators in order to preserve creative instruction and, we hope, save the craft that is teaching.

Moving forward, it is up to us, as creative teachers and leaders, to develop innovative and worthwhile ways of preparing students to reach benchmarks while engaging in real learning. In order to support learning that allows our students to achieve the literacies and competencies delineated in our Mission and Profile of Graduates, we need to investigate teaching methods that move beyond standardized assessment preparation and allow for true, authentic learning experiences to emerge.

**A Dilemma: Test-driven Curricula**

I can’t help but focus my attentions on what I believe to be at the core of many concerns- standardized testing as a primary means of assessing students and teachers. Not
only does this mode of assessment have a negative impact on the quality of teaching, but it can also have a significantly mis-educative effect on students. How, then, can we successfully advocate for an understanding of growth that goes beyond test scores?

Two of the three courses I teach are designed to prepare students for standardized exams. While students in two of the three sections are native speaking honors students, others are second language learners who struggle primarily with expression rather than content. This is largely due to their lack of time in the country and experience with the language. By the time they reach 12th grade, many are approaching age 21, the limit for public school participation in New York State. If they are placed in my ELA 12 class, they have failed the English Regents at least once, sometimes twice or more.

These students are wholly committed to their education. Many have only been in the country for a few years. Some have come to complete their education, work, and send money home to their families. Many are living below the poverty level and lack the privileges of many other students; yet they attend class, complete assignments, put forth effort, and dedicate their time. Still, many have a hard time graduating because they have failed to pass state assessments. Over the past few years, safety nets such as the English Regents Component Exams and the RCTs have been eliminated. Now, every student must pass the English Regents with a 65% or above in order to graduate from high school in New York State.

In many ways, these students are suffering an injustice; they are denied the privileges of native-born English speakers. These are by no means new problems- Jane Addams illuminated them more than a century ago. According to Charlene Haddock Seigfried in Ethical Visions of Education (2007), "She soon recognized the tendency of all
Going Public: Authentic Teaching and Learning through Publication
Katherine C. Donahue

levels of society to privilege their own perspectives, deeply rooted as they are in class, race or ethnicity, religion, and gender. Native born citizens, especially those better off financially and educationally...[justified] their superiority to the immigrant laboring population” (p. 84). A standardized state assessment such as the English Regents perpetuates the same notion of superiority despite early claims that standardized tests serve to “close the achievement gap.”

What’s more, while in the process of preparing struggling language learners to pass the exam with a 65% or above, teachers are coerced into teaching to the exam rather than cultivating meaningful learning experiences. While the effects of this may seem minimal, I’ve observed that overemphasis on test preparation undermines students’ desire to learn. As John Dewey (1938) notes, “The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative...Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience” (Dewey, 1938, p. 25). Entering curriculum through a test-prep approach prevents a large number of students from experiencing success and forces teachers to question their professional practice. Spending an academic year memorizing sentence patterns and phrases to regurgitate on a state exam denies students the opportunity to truly learn and develop skills applicable to their lives. However, blinded by the “veil” that Dewey mentions, these students rarely advocate for a different type of education because they do not know what they are missing. And although many teachers are painfully aware of the ramifications of test-driven curricula, they don’t acknowledge their own power as agents of change.
Addams, as noted in *Ethical Visions of Education* (2007) also believes in sympathetic understanding and the right of individuals to “develop to his or her utmost capacity” (p. 85). Teaching to the test denies students this right. When we design curriculum around a single, standardized assessment we deplete learning of creativity and inquiry. In her Credo, Lucy Sprague Mitchell advocates for “lively intellectual curiosities that turn the world into an exciting laboratory and keep one ever a learner.” Teaching to standardized assessments undermines such pursuits, even renders them impossible.

I face these challenge and tensions in my own teaching. Recently, my administration has put an enormous emphasis on students passing the New York State Regents Exam as pressure from state and central offices has been mounting. Apparently, our district’s English Regents passing rate for ELLs and classified students is cause for concern. In the past few years one of my assignments has been to design and implement a curriculum for students who need to pass the English Regents Exam. Each student was either classified with a learning disability, as an English language learner, or both.

In the five months I had to work with students in this class, my primary charge was to teach them how to pass the exam (therefore enabling them to graduate); I noticed that although fruitful discussion, inquiry, and deep textual analysis are at the forefront of my curricula for my other classes, I dedicated a majority of time in this class to Regents test preparation. Students desperately wanted to pass, and their attentions were focused on learning to do just that. Because of age limit to public schooling in New York, a number of the older students would not be given another opportunity to take the exam once the school year commenced. While denying them a high school diploma would be no less unjust, I’m plagued by the idea that the course became mis-educative the minute it was
created for the purpose of preparing students to pass a standardized assessment. Students unknowingly relinquished their rights to become learners.

The problem is rooted in the way we are required to assess students and document growth. As Frank Pignatelli (2010) notes in *Everyday Courage in the Midst of Standardization in Schools*, “...the ubiquity of standardization tempts the educator to regard this condition as normal and predictable, a given to be witnessed and suffered with resignation” (p. 231). But this does not have to be: “One can act in the midst of this, and not acting is a choice too...an educator’s commitment to democratic schooling is tested” (p. 231). An even larger concern would be compliance without questioning.

To return to the question at hand: “How can I successfully advocate for an understanding of growth that goes beyond test scores?” As Ayers notes, “Pay attention, be astonished, tell about it; or open your eyes, act, doubt, act” (McNeal, 2005, p.11). The awareness and questioning have occurred, but for the most part, action hasn’t been taken. As an educator who believes in social justice in and through learning, this is beyond unsettling. As William Ayers argues, teachers must “...choose to be conventional...to accept the world as it is, ...to accept our classrooms as they are” or to act for change.

So what is the first step? Perhaps it is seeking forgiveness for complying in the past. As Frank Pignatelli writes in *Forgiveness in Progressive Education*, “The power of forgiveness lies in its assertion of the possibility of new beginnings, renewal, and growth” (p. 6). It begins with recognizing the potential for change and growth, followed by forgiveness. Pignatelli argues that there should be a place in the progressive classroom to address the detrimental effects of standardized testing on students and teachers. I do believe that this was adequately addressed in my classroom. My students recognized why
we spent such time preparing for the exam, and in a way, they appreciated the sacrifice.

Thankfully, since students passed the exam in January, the second semester of the school year was focused around rich curriculum that pertained to their lives, their imminent futures, and the skills they truly needed to be college and career ready.

Real action for change takes the humility that Paulo Freire discusses in *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those who Dare Teach* and the “courage to work unafraid” that Mitchell highlights in her Credo. Perhaps it involves more democratic and effective communication between the state and federal education departments, school districts, teachers, and administrators. As Jane Addams notes, “Communication that opens itself to the differing attitudes, values, and worldviews of others, profoundly changes the self-understanding, values, and experiences...” (Hansen, 2007, p. 93). With communication comes cooperative solutions: “Importance of cooperative solutions in which all can share and that recognize the mutual dependence of all sectors of society on the others, as well as the need to examine all sides of the issue and to develop a willingness to experiment and try new solutions instead of falling back on old patterns of action and prejudices” (Hansen, 20-7, p. 91). While these may be the ultimate objectives, unfortunately it will take time, energy, and predictably, heartache. In the meantime, teachers may reclaim some sovereignty through their own curricula.

All in all, ethical concerns, questions, and problems result when individuals and situations are not treated fairly. An education that prioritizes standardized assessment and forces learners to forego rich educational experiences is unethical. In order to find solutions, we must first expose the problems, discuss the reasons behind the issues and why they are ethically wrong, and discover our own agency in enacting change in the day-
to-day work we do with students. In doing so, it is possible to integrate creative, authentic learning opportunities in the classroom while still addressing key skills areas and aligning to standards for excellence in teaching and learning.

Reframing curriculum to prioritize experiences that are educative and promote real learning is one way to empower teachers. While this may seem obvious, ignoring this discussion only perpetuates the current mis-educative trend. Curriculum designed to foster learning, divorced from any association with standardized assessment, can by nature redirect instruction.

As Arthur N. Applebee (1996) argues in Curriculnum as Conversation, “Education in general...is fundamentally a process of mastering new traditions of discourse...students are learning to participate in a variety of socially constituted traditions of meaning-making that are valued in the cultures of which they are a part” (p. 9). If the discourse consists solely of the language of testing, students will be inculcated with this knowledge and this knowledge only, and they will walk away with only the values of the test and the number with which they've been branded. Applebee continues to introduce the concept of “knowledge-in-action” by asserting that this knowledge “will come from participating in the tradition” (p. 12). If the tradition changes, however, so will students knowledge-in-action: “To participate in a tradition of discourse is to affirm (and also to define) its present relevance; by the way we participate, we define the way it is relevant” (p. 16). He continues, “Knowledge-in-action shapes our expectations about the future as well as our interpretations of the past” (p. 17). That is, if we change how we approach instruction presently, perhaps we can “re-construe” the past and shape the way students approach learning: “When individuals enter into new traditions of knowledge-in-action, they take on new ways of making sense of the
world and experiences” (Applebee, 1996, p. 19). I am proposing that we enter into these new “traditions of knowledge-in-action” and thus avoid “knowledge-out-of-context” that can be both “debilitating for the individual and for society” (Applebee, 1996, p. 20).

In terms of literature instruction, Applebee notes a number of what he calls “deadly traditions” that deplete the curriculum of authenticity because they involve “learning about” rather than “participating in” traditions of literature, and they avoid “authentic questions that encourage dialogue and debate... although teachers claimed to have broad humanistic goals for literature instruction...teaching of literature continued to be a relatively traditional enterprise” (p. 29). Most troubling, in observations, Applebee and others found that most classroom activities “emphasized the development of knowledge-out-of-context rather than knowledge-in-action” (p. 29). The problem here is that while instruction geared toward merely teaching and learning content (knowledge-out-of-context) may adequately prepare students for multiple-choice exams and other standardized assessments,

...it does not enable them to enter on their own into our vital academic traditions of knowing and doing. They lack the skills to develop a new interpretation, to analyze a new situation, or to muster evidence in support of new arguments and unexpected opinions. These are the skills of knowledge-in-action, generated through participation in real dialogue (Applebee, 1996, p. 33).

Applebee (1996) approaches curriculum as conversation. He notes, “Making sense of the experiences and voices...also involves engaging in particular ways of thinking and doing...they provide new tools to explore and make sense of the world” (p. 39). Conversations from multiple and multifaceted perspectives and discourses allow learners to “construct meaning.” Applebee highlights obstacles to achieving this goal: “The problem of curriculum planning...is the problem of establishing a conversational domain and
fostering relevant conversations within it” (p.44). One domain Applebee finds problematic is that of the American literature course which he believes has been unable to “sustain interesting conversation” because they lack a “living tradition of conversation into which students may enter” (p. 45).

In order to sustain such interesting conversations, we need, as designers of curriculum, to make curriculum relevant to students and their lives, to bring students into the conversation as active participants, and to allow for the knowledge-in-action to take place. In doing so, we will allow students to “enter into culturally significant domains for conversation, themselves representative of broader cultural traditions of knowing and doing” (p. 49).

Applebee points out four characteristics of effective curriculum.

Quality: an effective curriculum is built around language episodes of high quality-contributions to the conversation must be clear and accurate; 2. Quantity: an effective curriculum has appropriate breadth of materials to sustain conversation- it is inclusive but not so broad as to prioritize monologue over dialogue because of time constraints; 3. Relatedness: the parts of an effective curriculum are interrelated- there is a sense of direction to what has been covered and what remains to come; and 4. Manner: instruction is geared to helping students enter into the curricular conversation-instruction enables and supports student participation.(p. 53-65).

Creative Curriculum: A Response

In the article that ensues, I present a curricular endeavor that I believe embodies the principles of effective curriculum and knowledge-in-action that Applebee discusses. It is simultaneously an attempt to “take action” as Pignatelli and others so passionately encourage.

For this project, students in an 11th grade American literature course teamed with students in visual arts classes to collaborate on a professional publication project. Inspired by classic American literature and artwork, student writers and artists sought to depict
their interpretations of this elusive American Dream through a project-based curriculum initiative. The product, a publication of student work, embodies many variations of the Dream and speaks to the plight of native and foreign-born Americans alike. Profiles of the American Dream: A Collection of Essays and Artwork represents the diverse yet united fabric of our student body and the opportunities and challenges they anticipate as young Americans. Above all, it celebrates the creative potential and collaborative efforts of student artists and writers while proving that curriculum aligned to rigorous standards can still preserve the art of teaching and learning.

Project-Based Collaboration: Capturing the Essence of the American Dream through Written and Visual Art: A Manuscript Submitted to English Journal, May 2013

What is the American Dream? Inspired by classic American literature and artwork, student writers and artists of Sleepy Hollow High School sought to depict their interpretations of this elusive term through a project-based curriculum initiative. The product, a publication of student work, embodies many variations of the Dream and speaks to the plight of native and foreign-born Americans alike. Profiles of the American Dream: A Collection of Essays and Artwork represents the diverse yet united fabric of our student body and the opportunities and challenges they anticipate as young Americans. Above all, it celebrates the creative potential and collaborative efforts of student artists and writers.

The following article details the process through which student writers combine their interest in American literature, humanities, social sciences, and the arts to publish a book of original work that represents multiple interpretations of the American Dream.
**Impetus:**

The first year I was assigned to teach 11th grade Honors English, I had a clear vision of what I wanted to do with the curriculum and students. Teaching a survey course in American literature, naturally I wanted to present the rich tapestry of the American experience through text. And I wanted it to be meaningful, to be fun, to be memorable.

I’m sure this story is a common one. Ambitious educators leave graduate school empowered to change the course of education. They will make learning fun. They will have students returning after 20 years saying, “I don’t really remember much of high school, EXCEPT for your class!”

I was a second-year teacher at the time. Having had a quintessential first year full of trials and tribulations, instances of growth, moments of clarity, obscurity, frustration, celebration, and of course, eventual triumph (and then defeat and so on,) I was ready to settle into my new course and make it my own. If nothing else, I wanted, in some way, to incorporate student publication into at least one of my units. I started the year with F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, unequivocally my favorite book of all time. We would focus on love, delusion, and of course, the American Dream.

Like most teachers, I find that drawing connections between a text and the students’ lives stimulates more interest, understanding, and long-term retention than do rote or academic approaches. As such, we began with a discussion of dreamers- familiar people who are living products of the American dream. It was a highlight of the unit, and the impetus for a publication project I’ve been doing ever since.

Publication, in short, is one of the best ways to motivate writers- both novice and experienced. One of my high school teachers always encouraged her writers to send our
poems to student publication venues; this initiated my own interest in writing and remains the most indelible experience of my high school days. Seeing my name in print at a young age defined my perspective on teaching and learning.

Years later, while in graduate school at Teachers College, Columbia University, I had the privilege of learning from and working with Erick Gordon, founder of the Student Press Initiative (otherwise known as SPI). In Gordon’s Teaching of Writing course, I again experienced the joys of publication. At one point, Erick tasked us with interviewing and profiling an educator in our lives. It could be a former teacher, friend, relative, or absolute stranger. As long as we “captured the essence” of his or her teaching life, we’d succeeded. I profiled my aunt, and now every member of our immediate family has a copy of “Teaching Lives.”

Gordon’s adage, “Everyone’s writing should be print-worthy,” still rings true. And perhaps nowhere was this more evident than in the project he initiated at Riker’s Island, where student inmates published their oral histories (Gordon, j2007, p. 63-67). While at Teachers College, I spent some time editing the work of Rico, one of the inmates, helping to bring his history to print. Once again, it was a profound experience.

Like these teachers before me, I’ve learned that students are enticed by the possibility of publication for a wider audience. Students are motivated to reach their potential when they know they are writing for the public. In the past three years, a class publication project has become the cornerstone of my 11th grade Honors English class. Our class publication project has grown from my experiences as a student writer and the few publications to which I’ve enjoyed contributing. The project began as a traditional submit-
to-the-teacher-only assignment; then it became a class publication via the copy machine. Since, it has taken on a broader purpose.

In the fall of 2010, I applied for a small grant from The Foundation for the Public Schools of the Tarrytowns, an organization that fundraises and supplies teachers in our district with the means to bring vision and creativity into the classroom. With $500 and 43 eager students, we began to work toward publishing the first official edition of Profiles of the American Dream. It was a success and a source of pride for my students, their families, and the school.

This past year, with the help of a talented colleague, art teacher Kristen Dreher, twice the money, and almost that many more students, we published the first collaborative publication. Profiles of the American Dream: A Collection of Essays and Artwork now includes not only student writing, but also visual art such as drawings, paintings, sculpture, photography, and prints; these have brought the project to a new level, aesthetically, academically, and professionally. It has allowed me to collaborate with and learn from a motivated educator, and the product proves the old adage: two heads are better than one.

The following Introduction to the book provides an overview:

As the definition of what it means to be an American expands, so does the notion of the American dream. Students in English 11 Honors discovered this as they read F. Scott Fitzgerald’s timeless American classic, The Great Gatsby, Arthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman, poetry by T.S. Eliot and Langston Hughes, and current nonfiction essays. At the forefront of their literary inquiry was the notion of the American dream. Students agreed that the American experience is often expressed through literature, and the notion of “the dream” also
emanates from the pages of many texts. However this “quintessential American notion” doesn’t exist solely in the fictional or literary world. There are many living, breathing products of the American dream. We decided to find these people and tell their stories.

First, writers settled on a working definition of the American dream; then they selected a subject to profile. Students chose individuals who, they believe, have achieved, or are pursuing, some version of the American dream. Some chose to profile “self-made” men and women, while others opted to study people who have faced and overcome adversity. A number of students profiled immigrant parents, grandparents, and neighbors, while others worked with ambitious siblings, entrepreneurs, and community members. Through formal and informal interviews, students gathered information about their subjects’ past experiences, present ventures, and future aspirations. They observed model profiles and worked in writing groups to craft and revise drafts with the intention of sharing their writing with the public.

Simultaneously, student artists enrolled in Drawing, Painting, and Portfolio Seminar classes that used the theme of the American dream to inspire a variety of visual creations. Students were exposed to contemporary arts pieces and discussed the work of Jacob Lawrence, Norman Rockwell, Jasper Johns, Banksy, Shepard Fairey, and photographers Dorothea Lange, Mary Ellen Mark, and Robert Frank, among others.

Students were then asked to produce an image that visually depicted their view of the American dream through drawing, painting, printmaking, collage, graphic design, street art, sculpture, and photography. They delved into family history and made daily observations of the achievements, attitudes, and struggles, of people they interviewed, eventually portraying an inclusive representation of the American dream.
Going Public: Authentic Teaching and Learning through Publication
Katherine C. Donahue

Finally, with the support of our school community, we've been able to recognize our own dream of publication. We hope you enjoy our final product—a collection of life stories and images—profiles of the American dream!

The Writing Process

1. The Introduction- Scaffolding the Definition

   Each writer’s task is to identify and profile an individual s/he believes has achieved or is working to achieve the American Dream. First, we begin by exploring the concept itself. I allow students three minutes to write down everything that comes to mind when they hear the phase “American Dream.” Then, students share in a “popcorn style”- offering words and ideas when the mood strikes, when they hear a segue, or when there is an awkward pause in the room. Often, responses begin with: flag, hotdogs, picket fences, war, money, success, baseball, 4th of July, immigrants, houses, wealth. Once a convoluted web of ideas plasters the SmartBoard, we examine these distinct definitions:

   • “Americans really believe in self-invention. Making yourself into a more successful, richer, more genteel, more intelligent person. It’s the American dream.” -ERICA JONG

   • “The American dream is possibility. The American dream is freedom. “-RICHARD YARBOROUGH

   • “All of us have some ancestral image of someone getting off a boat or a plane or a maybe stepping out of a wagon train heading west. That is someone who has made a decision, made a choice to change their life.”-ANDREW DELBANCO
• “The idea of the self-made man is a quintessentially American notion.”
  -MATTHEW J. BRUCCOLI

• “The idea that if you are a serious and earnest person and you work hard enough, nothing will stand in your way. You will make it.” - MAUREEN HOWARD

I ask students to interpret the quotes and discuss in a pair-share. Each student chooses the one quote with which he or she most identifies; the partner is then required to practice active listening and share the responses with the class. This is the first of many exercises in listening, an infinitely important skill for writers. I ask students to listen closely as their partner speaks, and to write down three “I hear” statements. The listener must then report these statements back to the speaker to ensure accuracy. After switching roles, students share what they heard with the class.

Then, we give faces to the notion by watching two news clips that assess the organic nature of the American Dream. During and after each clip, students track and record their growing or changing definition of the Dream. After the videos, students often remark that perhaps the American Dream doesn’t have to always be about money, and that the interviewees spoke more about happiness than their bank accounts.

Then, finally, we read an article by Susan Strait, published in the NYTimes Magazine in 2007 called, “Greener Grass: A Shifting Land of Opportunity.” The article presents a poignant snapshot of two very different people with one very similar dream: to see their children enjoy all the successes that life, and America, has to offer. Students often sigh when we read about Jose, a Guatemalan-born, Californian landscaper whose American dream is crushed when his young sons leave the family business, and for Susan, whose daughter has decided to travel across the country to go to college. Many can relate to one,
or both, as their parents are immigrants and/or they’ve started the grueling process that is college-hunting.

At the end of Strait’s article, she recalls Jose throwing up his arms in resignation and questioning “whose dream it really is anyway.” It’s a puzzling springboard that adds just the right amount of confusion to render clarity. We then compare Jose’s experience to our brainstorm list and to the “official definitions” before scrapping it all and writing our own. Students’ homework that night is to write an original definition of the American dream and to think of one person who has achieved (or who is in pursuit of) the dream by this standard. The following are a few of the student-constructed definitions from this school year:

- The American Dream is the opportunity to be successful by being able to follow and achieve what makes you happy. Success can but does not have to be associated with wealth, it is making what you aspire into reality to live happily- Deborah D.

- I believe that the American dream is much deeper than material value…it is establishing something for yourself, your family, and other loved ones around you; which you’ll be able to do freely in this land of the free. The American dream is having the possibility to do whatever makes you happy as long as you work for it. – Destiny L.

- The American dream is the belief that any man or woman can be successful no matter what your ethnicity or background if you work hard enough- Will S.

- The American dream…is to accomplish the dreams you made up when you were a child because when we’re children we’re still innocent and don’t let obstacles get in the way. We just dream. – Bernardo R.
• It’s to know you lived the life you desired. – KelseyLynn M.
• It’s to continue a legacy of success through your own personal dream- Samantha D.
• You give America something like your time, and America guarantees you something back- Frandy C.
• It’s being happy for yourself and the people around you- Cindie C.
• The American Dream makes me think of opportunity…opportunity just means to complete your goals with the resources available to you. – Stephanie V.
• To have love, strength, and faith in yourself. – Katie P.
• For people to get what they want no matter how long it takes them…to live life to the fullest. – Samantha G.
• To never have to worry about economic issues. – Crystal S.
• To me the American dream is growing old the way you want and not at the mercy of others’ decisions… the opportunity to act on your choices and wants without anyone’s ridicule stopping you.
• The American dream can not be defined as a single thing. – Stephanie R.

2. Creating Writing Groups

When students arrive to class the next day, I distribute a step-by-step assignment sheet adorned with a colorful smiley-face sticker. This sticker (albeit cheesy) has purpose; it denotes their writing group for the next four weeks of the project. I generally hand-pick groups based productivity and comfort level. Sometimes I'll assign a stronger or more experienced writer to each group.
The first order of business in the writing groups is to present their personal definitions. These, of course, are not ossified. They can certainly morph with the student’s learning and growth. This initial sharing, however, allows for students to understand the various perspectives and get comfortable with their own ideas and those of others.

Then students discuss the person they’ve chosen to profile; from this point forward this individual is referred to as “the subject.” For the remainder of the period, I allow students to read from profiles written in past years. These exemplars provide a glimpse of what they’ll be working toward in the next few weeks. This is also the first time students truly realize that their own work will be shared with future 11th graders. They, the audience, are real and another real audience will be reading their work in the same seats next year. I relish the moments when students proudly find their older siblings’ stories and read about their own parents from another’s perspective. Sometimes I even catch a reluctant reader devouring a story written by a friend or neighbor.

3. **Interview Workshop:**

As a class, we conduct an interview workshop. We brainstorm qualities of an effective interview, and then we watch clips of the great interviewers of our time such as Katie Couric, Oprah Winfrey, and Peter Jennings. I ask, “What did you notice about these interviews? What did they have in common? How would you characterize the questioning style of each? What worked? What, perhaps, did not?” Then, as a class, we devise a list of generic interview questions to ask our subjects. These questions are just foundational, and students often end up re-phrasing or re-writing most. We agree that questions should be directed, but open-ended in order to elicit valuable responses. The goal is to learn about the subject’s life, childhood, career, education, aspirations, realities- to “capture the essence” of
this person. Students then share and workshop their interview questions until they are comfortable with 10-20 to bring to their interviews.

Given the nature of the assignment and the eclectic pool of subjects, I allow some latitude for the interview itself. Most subjects are fairly close friends or family members, with whom students are able to sit and converse. Others, however, are distanced and can only be reached by phone, email, or Skype. I encourage students to record and transcribe the interview, but some choose to take notes and document responses by hand during the interview. Some have one conversation, while others need to return a number of times until their tweaked questions render just the answers they've been looking for.

When we debrief, I always anticipate mixed responses. Some have had profound experiences, while others have rushed the assignment as a perfunctory duty. “It was weird!” is a common response for students who had to formalize interactions with parents or siblings. Others say something along the lines of, “It was cool to learn about my dad's childhood; I realized there is a lot I didn't know about him.” Still others say that it was hard to get their subjects to open up, even if they already have a close relationship. It always strikes me as ironic that most students have to either formalize or de-formalize the interview in order to elicit responses that can be used in the profile. It reminds me of an exercise in what Mitch Albom’s beloved professor Morrie Schwartz called “the tension of opposites.” Students create understanding through dissonance. Others think of clever ways to reach their subject. For instance, one student this year bribed his father to sit for the interview with a bag of avocados. It kept him occupied, satiated, and in the mood to talk about his warm-climate childhood. Another student’s father had no time to get away from his busy car-service business so the student spent a Saturday riding passenger and probing
for information. The interview experience gave way to the profile structure, a narrative based on the circular journey from town to John F. Kennedy Airport, the same portal through which the subject entered the country and has since brought each of his children.

When students share their interviews in writing groups, they again employ their listening strategies by recording three “I hear” statements during the course of the reading. Then, they provide more qualitative feedback by stating what they enjoyed and what warrants development. This provides direction for the writer and a sense of the readers’ response. If necessary, interviewers request a follow-up conversation with their subjects to clarify points or elicit more information.

4. Drafting and Technology Integration

We begin the drafting process with what we call “another look at the hook.” We return to exemplar pieces and focus only on the introductions. I generally select ten hooks and distribute them among students. Then, students determine which profiles most interest them based solely on the introductions. Most are drawn to profiles that begin with images, quotes, physical descriptions, or funny/shocking one-liners. Students then draft and share hooks in writing groups to ensure they have the right “effect.”

That night students complete their first draft using interview responses and their definitions of the American dream. Once drafts are in narrative form, I ask students to upload their writing to Google Docs and share their documents with the members of their writing groups and with me (each student and teacher is now assigned a Google account through the district). This allows for multiple revisions of the same draft, all saved, and for several students to comment on one draft. All comments appear to the right of the body
and are visible to the writer and to me. I ask students to read mostly for content and clarity at first. The suggested guidelines prompt them to look for themes, structure, organization, and even, possible titles. I ask that they be both encouraging and constructive in their responses. Most importantly, their feedback should be specific and reflect a true reading. Students are aware that a majority of their participation grade for the assignment is dependent upon the feedback they provide in this venue- and it’s all recorded for my viewing (and grading) pleasure.

For editorial purposes and if time permits, students in each group edit for specific errors (i.e. fragments and run-ons, subject-verb issues, passive voice, diction and word choice, punctuation issues, etc.). In a round-robin fashion, many errors are eradicated prior to final submission. Once each group member has read and commented, students revise yet again and submit profiles to me for additional editing and feedback. I provide very specific submission guidelines for font and format to avoid layout complications. I clarify that I will provide a “final proofing eye,” but that in terms of language and usage, they are to submit their most polished work. Although I often assume the burden of last-minute proofing, in the spirit of authenticity, I aim to leave this largely up to the students who will see their own work (flawless or not) in print.

5. Collaborative Layout, Publication & Celebration

The final phase of the project largely involves organization and layout work. We opt to use Lulu.com to self-publish our book. They offer free publishing services so all funds go to manufacturing and shipping. My first attempt at layout was truly a learning experience. I spent the better part of a month improperly converting and embedding fonts, re-creating
PDF documents, and attempting, unsuccessfully, to upload large documents to the site.

Despite the help of a small but very dedicated student editing and layout team, this part of the process proved more than challenging for a novice like me.

This past publication, however, we had the expertise of a talented artist and colleague, Kristen Dreher. As mentioned, the second grant funded a collaborative endeavor that incorporated student writing and visual arts. During the weeks my students were writing, my colleague’s art students were creating visual representations of the American dream. They began by reading profiles written in the last school year and exploring, much as we did in English class, the notion of the American Dream. They, too, examined the work of known artists, and selected a medium through which to express their take on the Dream. I visited a number of times to get a feel for what students were creating on the visual end. I was amazed. I’ve always had a profound love and respect for the arts, but the depth of these renderings provided just the juxtaposition needed to make our profiles come to life.

Once the paint (or clay, or oil, or chalk, or papier-mâché) dried, Kristen photographed the pieces. When we had hard copies of each profile and visual piece, we scattered them on the large surfaces of the tables in an art room, pairing each profile with a complementary or contradictory visual. Having two sets of creative eyes in this process was invaluable.

At this point, my colleague put her design and layout expertise to work using InDesign, a more advanced computer program. We agreed on a soft-covered, square book that would be published completely in color. Over the next few weeks she worked tirelessly to perfect the aesthetics. On the other end, I gathered “permission to publish” consent forms from students and subjects, and persisted with students who had yet to turn in a
final electronic draft (there are always a few). We met every Friday to adjust the format, review layout, discuss font options, clarify obscurities, confirm recognitions, write acknowledgements, and finally, upload the document for publication.

The final step is to recognize the accomplishments of our students. We planned an after-school book-signing event at the local library where we will donate a book for their collection and where students will receive their complimentary copy of *Profiles of the American Dream*. Visual art included in the book is on display for the month, and at our book-signing event, students will have the opportunity to sign books, feel proud, and show off their work. We’ve invited a few local journalists and our own high school digital news will be interviewing and featuring published students in the coming weeks. Our hope is to encourage the school and larger school community to purchase copies of the books for a small profit. All proceeds will help fund future collaborative publication projects and perhaps a small scholarship fund for one of our aspiring writers or artists as they pursue their own American Dream.

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**New Ways of Thinking, Learning, and Designing Curriculum**

*Right Brain Thinking*

In *A Whole New Mind*, Daniel H. Pink (2005) predicts that the future and the Conceptual Age will rely on the skills of right brain thinkers, the “creators and empathizers, pattern organizers, and meaning makers.” He describes “six essential aptitudes” for survival and success in this new age. These include: design, story, symphony, empathy,
play, and meaning. In order to cultivate such aptitudes, teachers and designers of curriculum that allows for the development of right brain functions.

While it may seem like an overwhelming charge, many authentic classroom learning experiences exercise right brain function and develop true academic and life skills. In the project I describe above, students are called to hone most if not all of Pink’s aptitudes. Perhaps the most conspicuous of the senses in reference to this undertaking is story. As Pink notes, “The essence of persuasion, communication, and self-understanding has become the ability to fashion a compelling narrative” (66). For this project, students not only had to learn about an individual, they had to tell that individual’s story in a compelling and communicative way. This requires a great deal of empathy on the part of the student writer: “What will distinguish those who thrive,” writes Pink, “will be their ability to understand what makes their fellow woman or man tick, to forge relationships, and to care for others” (p. 66). Gathering and telling the life story of another through interview and discussion requires great deal of trust, understanding, and care. It’s an authentic exercise in developing empathy.

Furthermore, in reference to design, Pink writes “Today it’s economically crucial and personally rewarding to create something that is... also beautiful, whimsical, and emotionally engaging” (p. 65). Much of the success of the publication project relied on the design skills of students who contributed to the layout and presentation of the book. Much consideration was given to font, color scheme, print size, dimension, and texture. Bringing the writing and visual components together demanded what Pink calls “symphony”-“seeing the big picture, crossing boundaries, and being able to combine disparate pieces into an arresting new whole” (p. 66). Students had to work together to synthesize
information for their written and visual pieces, and then again to unite individual projects into a cohesive publication.

Moreover, providing engaging and authentic learning experiences allows for what Pink terms play and meaning. Many students found opportunity for “lightheartendness, laughter, and humor” in their interactions with their profile subjects and as they worked together in writing groups. The nature of the project is human and interactive which often elicits students’ lighter, more playful side. Finally, it is the ultimate hope that the end result of studying and portraying the life of an individual in the context of a larger intention allows students to make meaning of their studies, the people in their lives, and the purpose of their learning. As Pink notes, “these abilities have always comprised part of what it means to be human” (p 67). It is now our responsibility as educators and curriculum designers to remember this.

**Authentic Learning and Social Constructivism**

It’s not a novel idea. Teaching through meaningful experiences- authentic learning opportunities- is essential. Others agree about the value of authentic instruction. In an article entitled, “School-Community Partnerships: Using Authentic Contexts to Academically Motivate Students,” Patricia P. Williams and Alyssa R. Gonzalez-DeHass (2012) explore the benefits of authentic learning experiences. They write,

We propose that engaging students in activities that are consistent with environmental and sociocultural structures existing outside school walls will ensure a greater degree of parallel between school environments and real-life tasks that will facilitate students’ meaningful learning of academic subject matter. These efforts will hopefully begin to address the commonly reported concern by educators that students, especially older students, do not see the meaningfulness in much of the academic subject matter they are exposed to in school. Instead, students see many academic tasks in terms of short-term learning necessary to secure a grade
and do not grasp the learning’s utility in the real world beyond the classroom. (p. 10).

Williams and Gonzalez-DeHass (2012) go on to explain the fundamental importance of students connecting to the world around them. As social constructivists, they argue in favor of “the belief that knowledge is constructed when individuals interact socially and talk about shared tasks or dilemmas (as cited in Driver, Asoko, Leach, Mortimer, & Scott, 1994).” According to Williams and Gonzalez-DeHass (2012, p. 11) “It is important that students’ experiences at school are connected with the world outside the classroom” (as cited in Santrock, 2011). Thus, teaching and learning that prioritize such interactions will certainly render indelible and impactful learning experiences. The social constructivist perspective champions learning in social situations where learning is shared and reflection is encouraged (Williams and Gonzalez-DeHass, 2012, p. 11-12). Furthermore, “Constructivist practices emphasize the importance of stimulating students’ self-regulated and active learning, connecting learning to authentic and real-life contexts, and encouraging students through open-ended questions and guided discovery (as cited in Erdogan & Campbell, 2008; Mayer, 2004; Thoonen, Sleeers, Oort, Peetsma, & Geijsel, 2011).

**Authentic Learning Experiences**

At the forefront of our class publication project was the emphasis on real-life context and a shared learning environment. Many elements of the Profiles Project such as writing group interactions, constructing definitions of the American dream, interviewing living individuals, and authoring work for an actual publication align seamlessly with what
Williams and Gonzales-DeHass would consider authentic learning. The class publication project also addresses instruction that is “learner-centered.” As Williams and Gonzales-DeHass (2012, p. 12) explain,

The social influences on learning are also echoed within the American Psychological Association’s 14 learner-centered psychological principles that emphasize the active and reflective nature of learners (as cited in Learner-Centered Principles Work Group, 1997). These principles are intended to apply to all learners regardless of age and summarize what research has revealed about how students learn (as cited in McCombs, 2003). Of particular interest to this paper is Principle 11, “Social influences on learning,” which states that learning is enhanced by social interactions and communication with others during instructional tasks. “In interactive and collaborative instructional contexts, individuals have an opportunity for perspective taking and reflective thinking that may lead to higher levels of cognitive, social, and moral development, as well as self-esteem” (as cited in Learner-Centered Principles Work Group, 1997, p. 6).

They go on to champion other benefits of authentic learning experiences including increased student motivation that directly results from making choices that result from authentic learning experiences. Students have the opportunity to engage in what they are learning, and in turn, feel “increased responsibility for their learning” (as cited in McCombs & Miller, 2007; Pierce & Kalkman, 2003; Weimer, 2002; Weinberger & McCombs, 2001). What’s more, these choices and experiences “are developed from within teacher- and state-mandated curriculum constraints. When students are given choices, it feeds an innate need for autonomy, and they are more likely to feel a sense of ownership, empowerment, and enjoyment in their learning; they are more likely to be intrinsically motivated and satisfied with instruction” (as cited in Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, 2010; McCombs & Miller, 2007; Weinberger & McCombs, 2001).

Furthermore, I’ve noticed first-hand that students are more motivated when the work they are engaging in has real-life application. As Williams and Gonzales-DeHass (2012) note,
Going Public: Authentic Teaching and Learning through Publication
Katherine C. Donahue

Authentic learning involves real-world problems that mimic the work of professionals in that discipline; utilize open-ended inquiry, thinking skills, and metacognition; engage students in discourse and social learning among a community of learners; and empower students through individual choices to direct their own learning projects (as cited in Rule, 2006). It is through these authentic activities that learners are exposed to a particular community of practice or culture’s use of a particular skill and, as a result, enhance their learning and transfer of that skill. (p. 15)

Research supports the anecdotal evidence reported in so many classrooms around the country, including my own, that “authentic tasks which essentially embed real-life context into school-related subjects like reading (Laster, Ortilieb, & Cheek, 2009; Parsons & Ward, 2011), and writing (Jago, 2002) lead to student engagement and improved performance. As mentioned earlier, it also positively affects student motivation (as cited in Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2006; Parsons & Ward, 2011). As Williams and Gonzalez-DeHass argue,

Authentic projects contextualize academic learning and may enhance deep understanding because students are required to apply information and concepts, set goals, test their ideas, and evaluate their progress in contexts similar to those seen outside of school (as cited in Blumenfeld et al., 1991). Students become interested and perceive the value in the activity when tasks are seen as authentic and having worth, there is choice about what work is done, and the teacher affords students opportunities to work collaboratively (as cited in Blumenfeld et al., 1991).

**Authentic Assessment**

The work of Williams and Gonzalez-DeHass (2012) also speaks to the collaborative nature our class publication project. They note that authentic learning experiences are valuable when a community of learners- both in a school and in the community beyond-participate (p.12). As our students worked closely with subjects from their network of friends, family, or community, the project took on a palpable sense of collaboration and
community. Throughout the project, students participated in writing groups that fed the collaborative element further. Students began taking interest in each other's work, and over time, felt a sense of responsibility for the work of others, not just their own. As Williams and Gonzales-DeHass (2012) note, these kinds of learning experiences “afford student choice to empower and motivate students; and establishing a collaborative community of learners who can scaffold each other's learning” (p. 17).

The publication project also allows for authentic assessment opportunities. As a teacher, I can assess a student’s writing progress as I follow their stages of the writing process. As Williams and Gonzalez-DeHass (2012, p. 17) note, “Students can also be evaluated through the use of authentic assessments in the classroom by using assessments created to mirror the real-life context” (as cited in Moon, Brighton, Callahan, & Robinson, 2005; Svinicki, 2004). Through publication, an audience of readers assesses student work. What’s more, students see more value in a task that reaches an audience other than one person- their teacher. There is real-world stakes that rarely exists in school-created writing tasks. As noted by Williams and Gonzales-DeHass (2012) and as evidenced by our publication project, “Authentic assessment can also require students to utilize knowledge from different subject areas” (p. 17). Our project requires skill in questioning, synthesis, writing, humanities, history, the arts, and social sciences.

While authentic assessment requires time, effort, and resources, the benefits far outweigh the drawbacks. As long as students have a clear understanding of purposes and expectations, and teachers articulate such and adhere to clear grading rubrics, authentic assessment is just as, if not more, informative and objective as any other.
Project-based Learning

In “Project-based Learning Engages Students in Meaningful Work,” authors Heather Lattimer and Robert Riordan use a case study approach to discuss the curricular benefits of project-based learning curriculum, but caution against projects that are too focused on product rather than the process of student learning. They offer insights into the possible adverse effects of this curricular model, and provide authentic examples of effective project-based learning curricula. The authors rely heavily on anecdotal data.

According to Lattimer and Riordan (2011), project based learning or PBL “is typically considered an approach to teaching in which students respond to real-world questions or challenges through an extended inquiry process” (p. 18). The authors note that peer collaboration, critical thinking, and interdisciplinary learning are at the forefront of project-based learning initiatives. Lattimer and Riordan (2011, p. 18) argue that when project-based learning is “thoughtfully designed and implemented” it can be “more effective than traditional instruction for teaching concept mastery in core academic disciplines, supporting long-term knowledge retention, improving mastery of 21st century skills (as cited in Boaler, 1997; Strobel & van Barneveld, 2008; Walker & Leary, 2008).

On the other hand, the authors underscore the possible pitfalls of this type of learning and instruction: “PBL often fails when the emphasis falls too heavily on the ‘project’ element of the title rather than the ‘learning’” (Lattimer and Riordan, 2011, p. 18). The authors cite Wiggins and McTighe (2005, p. 16) who coined this “activity oriented design” (p. 18). These “hands-on but not minds-on” activities fail to promote new learning and thus fail to truly exemplify project-based learning (Lattimer and Riordan, p.18).
The authors feature High Tech Middle School as an example of a school where project-based learning has been a successful cornerstone of the curriculum. Teachers “rely on Adria Steinberg’s (1997) six ‘As’ of design: academic rigor, authenticity, applied learning, active exploration, adult connections, and assessment practices” (Lattimer and Riordan, p. 19). A project that exemplifies academic rigor is social studies project named “The New Americans Project,” which “required students to consider the topic of immigration from both historical and contemporary perspectives” (p. 19). After extensive research about early 20th century immigration, students conducted oral history interviews with recent immigrants or “new” Americans (p. 19). Much like the Profiles of the American Dream project, students interviewed first generation Americans and composed meaningful stories about the subjects’ lives. In accordance with Lattimer and Riordan’s description, they “made thoughtful connections across historical time periods, and demonstrated critical thinking by recognizing the strengths and limitations of oral history as a historical inquiry technique” (p. 19).

Other projects at the middle school required students to extend themselves to their communities, think of innovative project ideas, establish working internships, and to make connections with adults. Some students in a humanities class connected with local adults who became their project mentors: mentors provided feedback and suggestions to strengthen the viability of students’ plans” (Lattimer and Riordan, p. 21). At the end of the project, students created action proposals for change in their communities. Overall, the work at High Tech Middle is a model of effective project-based learning.
Going Public: Authentic Teaching and Learning through Publication
Katherine C. Donahue

Publication Projects

In “Raising the Bar for Classroom Publication: Building a Student Press Initiative,” Erick Gordon, founder of SPI (Student Press Initiative, Teachers College, Columbia University) and current director of the New York City Writing Project writes about his personal experiences using publication projects to motivate students. The article, published in English Journal in 2007, is narrative and predominantly based on qualitative, insightful data.

Gordon begins by summarizing his personal journey from the world of professional publication to his work in the classroom, and eventually, to the idea that inspired SPI. Gordon (2007) notes, “at SPI we believe that curriculum-based publications that grow from highly specified genre studies in the classroom not only democratize students’ opportunities to publish but also, more importantly, raise the bar for what, how, and why students write (p. 63). Furthermore, SPI encourages partnerships between New York City students and the community. The initiative also publishes curriculum guides for the professional development of teachers.

Gordon (2007) highlights a number of SPI’s successful projects. At the Lab School in lower Manhattan, Gordon motivated his 8th grade writers with the incentive of “going public” with their work (p.64). For one project, students published a book called Coring the Apple: The Best of New York featuring best-of reviews of students’ favorite places in the city.

Once he founded SPI, Gordon created collaborative partnerships with many New York City teachers to encourage and foster publication-based writing curriculum. In a partnership with the Beacon School, themes such as social justice and community activism propelled a semester-long inquiry that culminated in a student publication featuring
important social issues and effective, innovative activism. In About Face: Portraits of Activism, students worked within the challenging genre of profile. As Gordon (2007) notes, “A profile writer must be able to research, develop rapport with a subject, conduct and integrate interviews into writing and, above all, craft an engaging narrative in a limited amount of space” (p. 66).

The final project Gordon features in the article took shape at Horizon Academy at Riker’s Island. All project participants were inmates at the time of writing and publication: “Each had previously dropped out of school and was attending the jail’s high school to complete credits toward either diplomas or equivalency exams” (p. 66). Despite disparate skill levels, SPI teaching artists and Horizon Academy teachers presented the genre of oral history to students who then revealed their stories through “spoken narrative” (p. 66). Students in the Bronx engaged in another oral history project; for this, students paired with a local senior citizen to created a “collection of life stories” (p. 67). Gordon remembers one student whose “academic career, once riddled with school suspensions and truancy, is now best characterized by his editorial prowess” (Gordon, 2007, p. 67).

Since 2007, the Student Press Initiative and Gordon’s work beyond the classroom have grown to enormous proportions. Students around New York City and beyond are relishing the joy of seeing their names in print, and teachers are inspired to include student publication projects in their curricula. I would be remiss if I didn’t credit Gordon and the work of SPI for my own interest in “bringing students’ work public.”

In “Transforming Young Writers’ Attitudes toward Writing and Becoming Writers” authors Matthew Brown, Jodene Morrell and Kathleen Dudden Rowlands (2011) discuss the transformative experience of young writers who attended a two-week writing camp
through the National Writing Project. Students’ attitudes toward writing were surveyed using qualitative and quantitative ratings before and after the experience. The article suggests that creative approaches to writing curriculum have a positive effect on students’ attitudes toward writing.

Brown, Morrell, and Rowlands argue that traditional approaches to teaching writing stifle young writers who often feel insecure about their writing abilities. The authors assert that “lack of confidence and related writing anxiety often haunt students throughout their high school careers, following them to the university and beyond” (as cited in Baez, 2005). As a result, the objective of the camp is to develop writers’ confidence and to allow writers to experiment and thus “mark the world” with their word (Brown et al., 2011). Writing tasks are intended to be authentic, and students publish and share their work at the end of the two-week summer camp.

During the experience, young students discover their voice; intermediate students develop their voice; and high school students “write with an attitude” (Brown et al., 2011, p. 15). Before camp begins, campers take a writing interest survey that is numerical and anonymous. They take the same survey at the end of the two weeks. Camp leaders see a change in attitude for the better. They attribute this success to “student choice, revision, writer’s craft, publication, and authentic assessment” (Brown et al., 2011, p. 15). As Brown, Morrell, and Rowlands (2011) believe, it is about “reconceptualization of writing and writer identity” (p. 17). In the end, moving away from a sterile approach to writing instruction and allowing students to see value in their work has a positive effect on their interest and productivity.
Professional Extensions

Teacher Publication

Another element of this project worth noting is the impact of teachers sharing their experiences as anecdotal researchers in the classroom. Through writing for publication themselves, professional educators give voice to their work. From my own experience, writing for publication—both creatively and professionally—gives deeper purpose to my work and bolsters the confidence I have in myself as an educator. In an article entitled, “Transforming Teacher Voice through Writing for Publication, authors Tracy L. Smiles and Kathy G. Short (2006) examine the “transformative potential” and underlying challenges faced by teacher writers in their journey toward professional publication (Smiles & Short, 2006, p. 133).

Among the benefits of teacher research is the immediacy of its application, ability of teachers to “gain voice” among colleagues in the field, and the excitement of having an impact on the work of others (Smiles & Short, 2006, p. 133). Yet as Smiles and Short note (2006, p. 134), “Teacher research, however, continues to be underrepresented in professional publications, even though many educators recognize the potential of teacher inquiry for building knowledge and generating theory about teaching and learning (as cited in Mills, 2003).” The hectic work and home life schedules of many teachers may be to blame for the dearth of submissions.

When teachers to find the time and confidence to write for publication, they “have the opportunity to reflect deeply on their practice by exploring the beliefs, values, and images that guide their work” (Smiles & Short, 2006, p. 135). What’s more, as Smiles and Short note, inquiry among teachers sheds light on happenings in the classroom and leads to
better understanding of students and practice (2006). Once they decide to take the leap and go public with their inquiry, however, teacher writers often face obstacles. As Smiles and Short (2006, p. 135) note, “Although writing offers many professional benefits for teacher researchers and the broader educational community, the journey from writing to actual publication is a daunting one. Teachers’ lack of familiarity with the publication process leaves them uncertain about publishing their work, thus opening it up to scrutiny by the public, their colleagues and their students (as cited in Crowe, 1992).”

In their quest to support teacher researchers writing for publication, Smiles and Short launched a program called Mentoring Teacher Researchers in Writing for Publication. They first identified teachers who were practicing inquiry in the classroom and who had an interest in publishing. The National Writing Project proved to be a useful network in identifying such teachers (Smiles and Short, 2006, p. 136). The next hurdle for Smiles and Short (2006) involved helping teachers revise manuscripts to be more suitable for academic publication.

Once manuscripts began arriving, the challenge we faced was how to support the writing of these teacher researchers to optimize their chances of getting published. One way in which we assisted teachers was by offering close, careful, and safe readings of their manuscripts. Many did not understand and, as a result, feared the formal peer-review process. Tracy read through their drafts, keeping in mind the key features of published teacher research that she had identified through her professional readings and conversations with the editors. She wrote extensive comments directly on the manuscripts along with a letter of suggestions for revising. (p. 136).

When they noticed that teachers were still struggling, Smiles and Short found it useful to compile exemplar articles for teachers to view as models (p. 137). Smiles and Short also exposed teacher researchers to the array of publication venues for such writing. Many of the teachers were unaware of the forums that existed. Most venues were pleased to see
“true teacher research” as graduate student or graduate professor writing accounted for the bulk of submissions (Smiles and Short, 2006, p. 137).

Another common issue that daunts teacher publication is a misunderstanding of the manuscript format. As Smiles and Short (2006) note, “manuscript formats...were not appropriate for a professional journal” (p. 138). Instead, manuscripts read like traditional research papers for a college or graduate course. The issue is with the intended audience, and for many course papers, “engaging the reader” is not of primary concern (p. 138). As Teal (1992) remarks, “It is not simply giving the editors what they want. It's more the case of giving the field what it needs” (as cited in Smiles and Short, 2006, p. 138).

Developing Teachers’ Voices

The authors go on to highlight issues they addressed with teachers eager to publish. These include “using a teacher voice, writing from a point of tension, integrating theory within the manuscripts, reflecting on research findings, having a central focus, using supportive classroom examples, avoiding teacher heroism, and considering the broader implications of the research” (Smiles and Short, 2006, p. 139). In terms of teacher voice, Smiles and Short encouraged their teacher writers to avoid opening manuscripts with long literature reviews; instead, they suggested using a more inviting first person point of view or personal vignettes of classroom experiences. In this way, the reader feels a connection to the piece and sees relevancy and applicability in the writing. They continue to encourage the use of “student artifacts, such as entries from student logs” or even “a short interview or discussion transcript” (p. 139). Furthermore, journal articles should arise from a “point of tension” rather than read as a report of a project or general finding. The goal, according
Going Public: Authentic Teaching and Learning through Publication
Katherine C. Donahue

to Smiles and Short (2006), is to “offer new insights” to the field of education (p. 140). Authors also encourage their writers to blend theory and practice and to avoid cumbersome and lackluster literature reviews. The focus, they say, should be on the teacher’s own findings and insights while grounded in some established theory.

Other areas of focus for growth and improvement in professional publication included reflective and focused writing. Smiles and Short instructed teachers to narrow the focus of their manuscripts and provide depth regarding what they “most wanted to say” (p. 142). Once this is established, authors invited teachers to include details from their own classroom experiences to illustrate their point. This fosters deeper connections between readers and writers: “The details are what allow readers to connect those statements to their own lived experiences in classrooms and to gain a deeper understanding of these ideas” (p. 142). However, Smiles and Short caution against “teacher heroism,” or writers depicting themselves as heroes without grounding the successes in the problems that initiated their work in the first place: “Many teachers...tend to write about a problem they identified and how they solved their problem through innovative teaching techniques that appeared to have been implemented without a hitch, yielding miraculous results” (Smiles and Short, 2006, p. 143). To the teaching audience of readers, this can translate as unreal and unattainable.

Finally, Smiles and Short encourage their writers to end their manuscripts with reflections and applications for the broader field of teaching. They say readers yearn for the “so what” of it all, and are more apt to take something from a piece that articulates this clearly (p. 143). Once the writing process is complete, however, the authors note that
many writers hesitate to submit their work because they are “unfamiliar with the review process” or they submit only once and give up after an initial rejection.

Beyond that, if manuscripts are accepted, the lengthy and time-consuming revision process deters some people from writing and submitting in the future. One teacher noted, “For me it has taken a couple of years, and though I have other good ideas for another article, I don’t feel motivated enough to follow through until I actually see the first one in print” (Smiles and Short, 2006, p. 144). Others find that they do not necessarily agree with the editor’s revisions and thus they withdraw their manuscript from review. Rather than withdrawing the manuscript, the authors suggest defending one’s decision to reject the change. In short, a lack of knowledge about the process often prevents writers from pursuing publication. Overall, the work or Smiles and Short legitimates the need for attention in the field of teacher research and writing, and provides clear and realistic guidelines for success.

Teacher Collaboration

The benefits of collaboration among teachers and administrators are irrefutable, but constraints such as time, scheduling, and money often preclude the formation of promising partnerships. In “Finding Time for Collaboration,” Mary Anne Raywid presents creative ways to circumvent obstacles that relate specifically to time. She begins by asserting, “Collaborative time for teachers to undertake and then sustain school improvement may be more important than equipment or facilities or even staff development “(Raywid, 1993). She notes that successful schools are those that champion collaboration and urge teachers to discuss practice, share materials, co-design curriculum, and assist in each other’s
professional growth. In order to promote school growth, “teachers must have time for sustained collaborative reflection on school practice, conditions, and events” (p. 30). Raywid suggests building in “pupil-free” work days into the school calendar or to work in a rotating schedule that frees up teacher time during the day. This is, of course, an ideal solution that may not be feasible for schools on a tight budget.

Raywid (1993) goes on to highlight schools that have implemented collaborative time without “substantially increasing school costs, and then specifically focuses on the benefits of service learning and other worthwhile uses of student time such as tutoring or peer mentoring (p. 30). While students participate in these activities under the guidance and supervision of a few, teachers are released to collaborate, develop curriculum, and to critique and improve operational practices. One school implemented “hobby day” for which non-instructional staff presented their favorite hobby and involved students in the task. This freed teachers to meet for some time one day a week. Teachers in Asia, according to Raywid, welcome larger class sizes and spend between 30-40% of their school day performing non-instructional responsibilities. University partnerships, on the other hand, provide an alternative to larger class sizes. University partners instruct students at times while teachers collaborate. Paraprofessionals oversee supervision. Finding time in the school day, adding time to the school day, or rearranging “staff utilization patterns” are the three primary avenues for school leaders to pursue to find time for collaboration (p. 33).

Overall, Raywid reminds administrators to be mindful of infringing on teachers’ personal time and of their need to be present in their own classes. She emphasizes that conscientious teachers are concerned about the happenings of the classes and do not want to be absent too often. She also warns against planning collaboration time at the end of a
tiring school day when teachers are exhausted and may be under-productive. Finally, she says there needs to be a change in the culture of collaboration. That is, teachers and leaders must see the importance of time spent collaborating, even if it requires time lost in the classroom. This time is not “auxiliary” but necessary and vital to a school’s health. This may, in the end, demand a rethinking of school hours, calendar, schedule, and time in general (Raywid, 1993).

Leadership plays an important role in establishing an environment conducive to collaboration. In “Reculturing for Collaboration and Leadership,” Lawrence and Pauline Leonard (1999) present findings from a study that identified “professional learning communities for teacher collaboration” and the leadership practices that governed each (p. 237). The study found that many teachers valued informal collaboration over “collaboration by design” (p. 237). As the authors note, school leaders have been charged with spearheading a movement of professional change in education. That is, “to move beyond the typical norms of isolationism and individualism to become continual co-learners alongside their students.” (p. 237). They continue, “Creating and maintaining such a culture of professional collaboration necessitates new understanding of appropriate school leadership” (p. 237).

Recent conceptions of leadership call on school leaders to “articulate a shared vision, foster group goals, [provide] individual support to subordinates, [provide] intellectual stimulation, [provide] appropriate behavior modeling and [set] high performance expectations (p. 237-238). Even more recently, educators have realized that the role of leadership should not be confined to supervisory positions only. A focus on “collegiality and commitment” empowers all. This encompasses participatory decision
making and planned collaborative experiences. The authors note, however, that problems can arise in terms of heavy demands on time and the skills training necessary for all to participate in decision-making and planning. Most of all, those involved must keep an open mind regarding their ever-changing professional roles. After administering and reviewing surveys given to staff members at various high schools, Leonard and Leonard concluded that “collaboration should first and foremost be spontaneous, voluntary, and founded in a shared commitment to the task at hand. Scheduled meetings and specified groupings are both desirable and necessary for school functioning, but they are not the only means of effective collaboration” (p. 241). In short, teachers who may or may not have an official leadership role have the potential to take on and lead important collaborative endeavors.

**Reflections and Implications**

The project I delineate and the research that corroborates my own findings are at once promising and nuanced. Oddly, there are limited resources available in the form of professional articles that describe similar projects and results. Perhaps, as noted by Smiles and Short, teachers are lacking the confidence, time, knowledge, and encouragement to share their work with a larger audience.

I personally felt a nagging fear of rejection when writing about my work for a broader audience. I began to weigh the practical dilemmas against the perceived and recognized successes. For one, time is a major issue when embarking on a publication project like the Profiles Project. It requires weeks of planning and preparation- including time to apply for the grant, class time to establish writing group norms, time in class and after to conference and edit with students, time to layout the book- especially if only a few
students volunteer to help, time to write blurbs, emails, notifications, and postcards to spread the words, time to organize a celebration/show/signing, etc. A project like this can leave one exhausted, perhaps too exhausted to follow-up again the next year.

This was the third year I conducted this project with students, and each year it has become more complex, more time-consuming, and more public. While it has been a wonderful experience, my practical self is pumping the brakes. As the project becomes more public, it invites criticism, scrutiny, and high expectations for continuation and improvement.

Yet, these difficulties are overshadowed by academic and professional benefits. The Profiles Project continues to render optimal student engagement in a learning experience. What’s more, students often reflect that they are most proud of the effort they put forth for this project and the work they produced as a result. In turn, it has been equally professionally rewarding; it has been a highlight of my career to teach and mentor students through an authentic learning experience. It proves that providing meaningful instruction is not only paramount, but at the core of our professional responsibilities and ethical obligations as educators.
APPENDIX A: Sleepy Hollow High School, School Context

Sleepy Hollow High School is the secondary school in the Tarrytown Public School District (also known as Union Free School District of the Tarrytowns). It is located in Sleepy Hollow, New York, a village in Southern Westchester, approximately 20 miles north of New York City. The district, which operates on the Princeton Plan, is comprised of a diverse population of students and teachers. According the district website:

Sleepy Hollow High School serves approximately 850 ethnically and socio-economically diverse students in grades 9 through 12 from the villages of Sleepy Hollow and Tarrytown. We have become a community of choice for families who value our “snap shot” of the real world: Our community is a destination point for families immigrating from the Caribbean and Latin America, and home to families who have been in our villages for generations; families who can afford to send their children to any one of a number of private schools in the area, choose instead to have their children attend our public school (tufsd.org).

In the 2009-2010 school year, the ethnic/racial breakdown of the student body revealed that: 32% of students are white (267), 7% are African American (54), 58% are Hispanic or Latino (483), 2% are Asian (14), and 1% is multiracial. 35% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch (city-data.com). There are 55 teachers in the building, and only one teacher has fewer than three years of teaching experience, and the attendance rate for the high school hovers just above 90% (city-data.com). The school has a 15:7 student/teacher ratio. According to the Annual New York State Student Performance Report, 18% of Sleepy Hollow High School students are considered limited English proficient (3rd highest in state outside of NYC), and 43% are considered economically disadvantaged. The class of 2010 had a 94% graduation rate (79% with Regents diplomas) and a 96% college acceptance rate (tufsd.org).
Between the years of 2006-2009, the high school underwent extensive renovation and expansion to meet the needs of the district’s growing population. Currently, each classroom is state-of-the art, equipped with a SmartBoards and access to laptop computers. Furthermore, the curriculum at the high school is consistently enhanced by knowledge of best practices in the field. Each year, initiatives such as differentiation, inquiry-based learning, and authentic assessment are studied and implemented. Teachers are encouraged to attend professional development workshops and share their knowledge with colleagues.

Sleepy Hollow High School offers its students a variety of academic programs and classes. The availability of internship opportunities, unique courses such as mountain biking and science research, partnerships with local colleges, successful sports and arts programs, and advanced placement courses enable students to tailor their high school experience to meet their interests and goals. Additional support programs are provided for immigrant and struggling students. The ESL center provides daily language and homework support for English language learners. The “Humanities Team,” an early intervention program, targets students deemed at-risk for pre-graduation drop-out. The afternoon academy serves students who, for various reasons, are unable to attend classes during regular school hours. All of these students receive additional support and structures that enable them to succeed in high school and beyond.

Perhaps it is a reflection on these programs and initiatives that Sleepy Hollow High School has been recognized for its impressive graduation rates:
Sleepy Hollow was among the top 40 from over 640 schools to reach benchmark graduation rate standards and was one of five exemplary high schools chosen for in-depth research, study, and visitation by the Magellan Foundation (tufd.org).

Despite the fact that 23% of students are considered second language learners and are in need of language support, performance on state exams for grades 3-8 falls at or above state averages. Generally, the passing rate for state exams required for graduation is about 90%. Recent New York State English Regents test scores from recent years reflect that 80% of students who have taken the exam have passed with 65% or higher and 40% has received 85% or higher. Teachers are actively working to close the achievement gap for students who enter 9th grade far below grade level in reading and writing proficiency by aligning curriculum to Regents-specific tasks and implementing inclusive texts in all classes—including ESL and special education classes. Overall, the district works to serve its diverse learning population by taking advantage of innovative teaching practices and partnerships with the community at large.
APPENDIX B: Middle States Re-accreditation Process Overview

Since October 2011, as an Internal Coordinator for our school’s Middle States Re-Accreditation process, I have had the opportunity to operate within a number of the ISLLC standards for leadership. This work is evidenced in various documents and in the school’s renewed accreditation, effective December 2012.

The first phase of the accreditation process involved participating on a committee to re-write the school’s Mission Statement, Beliefs, and Profile of Graduates. As a chair of this committee, I met with twelve other members of the department to draft these foundational documents. We began by evaluating the former documents, sharing ideas about what is still paramount to our educational program, and offering fresh ideas for the new document. After all members of the group contributed, my co-coordinator and I finalized the statements and presented the documents to the school community for approval. This activity is directly aligned to first ELLC standard as I had the opportunity to “facilitate the development, articulation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared by all stakeholders.” This mission statement is now the cornerstone of our educational program:

The mission of Sleepy Hollow High School is to empower all students to fulfill their potential as global citizens who possess the knowledge, skills, and determination necessary to enjoy a life of worth. As such, Sleepy Hollow nurtures students to respect diversity, champion personal growth, and engage in life-long learning opportunities as they navigate a rapidly changing and complex world.

The series of Beliefs that accompany the Mission speak to the philosophy of education and learning shared by members of the school community. (see appendix). These Beliefs affirm the need for rich educational experiences, rigorous curriculum, personalized educational opportunities, and fostering global citizenship among the student body. A final component of the foundational documents, the Profile of Graduates, breaks
down what students will know and be able to do upon graduation into four categories: 21st century literacies, academic competencies, cognitive skills and social, personal, and interpersonal skills.

After “re-visioning” the new Mission, Beliefs, and Profile of Graduates, we administered surveys to faculty/staff, students, and parents to gather data regarding each of the twelve indicators of quality and to assess our adherence to the twelve Middle States Standards of Accreditation. So of these are concerned with organizational capacity while others address the educational program. In doing so, we had to “collect and use data to identify goals, assess organizational effectiveness, and promote organizational learning” (ELLC 1).

The Planning Team and Internal Coordinators then created subcommittees to review the data and draw conclusions regarding the effectiveness of our organizational capacity. The survey findings informed the work of subcommittees as they evaluated and reported findings for Standards of Accreditation. As Internal Coordinator, I developed guidelines and templates for the sub-committee chairs to share with their teams, and provided specific guidance as necessary. In doing so, I had to “develop the capacity for distributed leadership” among the chairs and members of these committees (ELLC 3).

While the committees were at work, we collected student test performance data and demographics to create a current profile. We amassed demographics and an experience faculty for the same purpose, and wrote an overview of the history of our district. Then, we compiled this data into the Profile of Student Performance and Profile of School and Community. This provided a baseline for the objectives we were preparing to write. Again, this required that we “collect and use data to identify goals, assess organizational
effectiveness, and promote organizational learning” (ELLC 1). The purpose, of course, was to evaluate the effectiveness of our then current practices in order to “sustain a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and instructional growth” (ELLC 2).

Once the subcommittee reports were complete, my co-coordinator and I facilitated Planning Team meetings to share and discuss the reports. This was a true exercise in management, as leading the meetings required careful planning and steering of decision-making processes. As a team, we honed in on areas of weakness and those in need of improvement. With anecdotal and objective data in hand, the Planning Team brainstormed specific objectives for school improvement. We reported these findings to administration and community stakeholders.

The findings of the Subcommittees were then employed to create the new vision for our school’s organizational capacity and student performance. With input from the members of the Planning Team, we, the Internal Coordinators, drafted 5 measurable objectives for student performance and organizational capacity. These objectives reflect the need to improve student test scores on benchmark assessments while recognizing the importance of preserving school culture and a comprehensive educational experience despite state and federal mandates.

The next step in the re-accreditation process involved “create[ing] and implement[ing] plans to achieve goals” (ELLC 1). This took the form of the Action Plans. In this phase, committees, selected by school leadership and the Internal Coordinators, met to construct 7-year plans to ensure our meeting of the new objectives. As per my responsibility as an Internal Coordinator, I created directions and a template to guide each
of the Action Plan Teams. The Action Plans, which are currently underway, are being overseen by Implementation Teams which are charged with “monitoring and evaluating [the] progress and revis[ing] plans.” As Internal Coordinator, I had the responsibility of forming and guiding the work of these teams.

In December, 2012, a group of educators visited the school for four days. During this time, they evaluated the effectiveness and degree to which we are striving to enact our Mission, and observed the “action” of the Action Plans in accordance with the Objectives for School Improvement. The visitors met with special committees, school leadership, teachers, students, parents, community partners, and other stakeholders. Happily, after a rigorous evaluation, the team recommended our school for full accreditation. They lauded our unique, individualized approach to teaching and learning, our progressive leadership, and the dedication of our faculty and staff. The team also recommended that we continue to involve parents and community partners in our work, and use current data to drive cutting-edge instructional practices. Below are excerpts from the oral report delivered by Dr. Valerie Valenti, MSA Visiting Team Chair.

1. **A remarkable faculty and staff** (“the new legend”) who demonstrate dedication to teaching and go to great lengths to meet the needs of their students, working well beyond contractual obligations and building personal connections with students and families.

2. **Outstanding educational programs** that include an extensive array of rigorous courses that exceeds traditional honors and AP classes, and teachers who routinely
use the best research-based instructional practices and technology applications to deliver instruction.

3. **Planning Council** ("some of your best thinking") where teachers own the work of increasing student engagement; they establish and increase much-needed connections between teens and caring adults, and address critical topics faced by today’s youth that are beyond classroom curriculum.

4. **Commitment to provide academic rigor and opportunity for all students** ("just not a one-size-fits-all school") that embraces diversity and turns challenges into strengths, with no one group or individual feeling like they are left out or underserved.

5. **The leadership of the school**, with a principal whose constancy and vision has shaped the structure and nature of programs and who has created a culture of acceptance and commitment to excellence. The impact of her deep knowledge of pedagogy and practices along with her conviction, compassion, and courage is evident in the trust and support of those with whom she works most closely and the remarkable outcomes Sleepy Hollow High School has been well recognized for achieving.

The Team also made two recommendations for further improvement:

1. **Increase involvement of all stakeholders in the planning process** (including our college partners) to expand influence and meaningful ownership beyond the faculty.
2. *Continue to use data to inform instruction and program development*, deepening awareness of the volume of available data, and how it can best be used by teachers in daily lesson planning.

From authoring foundational documents to overseeing the implementation of the action plans, much of the work I experienced not only involved creating a shared vision, but also “collaboration with faculty and community members” to “respond to diverse community interests and needs.” This also required “mobilizing community resources” to reach this end (ELLC 2). To achieve 100% faculty involvement in the process, collaboration was key. To receive this feedback from the visiting team required careful planning and precise utilization of the strengths and resources of our organization and its members.
APPENDIX C: Sleepy Hollow High School Objectives, 2012

Student Performance Objective: English Language Arts
By the year 2019 SHHS students will demonstrate increased achievement of essential learning aligned with Common Core Standards as evidenced by:

- Improved ELA Regents mastery rate scores by 10% over 7 years: baseline 34% 2010-2011.
- Improved ELA Regents passing rate for students with disabilities by 15% over 7 years.
- Improved ELA Regents passing rate for ESL students by 15% over 7 years.
- Improved median score on Critical Reading and Writing sections of the SAT by 10% over 7 years.
- Improved median score on English and Reading sections of the ACT by 10% over 7 years.
- Local pre-assessments and post-assessments in ELA classes 9-12 administered in accordance with New York State APPR mandates.

2. Student Performance Objective: Math
By the year 2019 SHHS students will demonstrate increased achievement of essential learning aligned with Common Core Standards as evidenced by:

- Improved Integrated Algebra Regents mastery rate scores by 10% over 7 years: baseline 22% 2010-2011.
- Improved Integrated Algebra Regents passing rate for students with disabilities by 15% over 7 years.
- Increase enrollment in non-honors sections of Algebra II/ Trigonometry Regents classes and increase AlgebraII/Trig Regents passing rate for those classes by 10% over 7 years. baseline: 35% 2010-2011
- Improved median score on Mathematics sections of the SAT by 10% over 7 years.
- Improved median score on Mathematics sections of the ACT by 10% over 7 years.
- Local pre-assessments and post-assessments in math classes administered in accordance with New York State APPR mandates.

3. Student Performance Objective: 21st Century Literacies
By the year 2019 SHHS students will demonstrate increased proficiency of the 21st Century literacies as stated in the 2011 Profile of Graduates as evidenced by:

- Increased appreciation of civic and global citizenship through tolerance and respect for diverse races, cultures, and lifestyles.
- Participation through broadened and meaningful community service opportunities.
- Improved measurement on health and wellness indicators.
- Increased use of digital technologies to access and interpret knowledge thereby furthering information and media literacies.
• Provide increased opportunities for critical thinking and problem solving skills in core curricular areas: Social Studies, Science, English, Math, and Foreign Language.
• Local pre-assessments and post-assessments in core curricular areas administered in accordance with New York State APPR mandates.

4. Organizational Capacity Objective: Provide Opportunities for a Comprehensive High School Experience
By the year 2019 SHHS will develop and implement novel programs that incorporate required mandates while maintaining the vitality and variety of student life.
• Increased opportunities to plan for alignment of curriculum to Common Core Standards and state-mandated assessments.
• Develop a variety of courses and programs to meet a range of students’ needs. Formulate prerequisites for courses as necessary to further ensure student success.
• Increased student involvement of extra-curricular activities by 10% within 7 years (see baseline data on student extra-curricular from the 2011-2012 school year).
APPENDIX D: Photos from the Project Book-Signing Event, Warner Library, May 2013
What is the American Dream?

Inspired by classic American literature and artwork, student writers and artists of Sleepy Hollow High School sought to depict their interpretations of this elusive term through a project-based curriculum initiative. The product, a publication of student work, embodies many variations of the Dream and speaks to the plights of native and foreign born Americans alike.

Profiles of the American Dream: A Collection of Essays and Artwork represents the diverse yet united fabric of our student body and the opportunities and challenges they anticipate as young Americans. Above all, it celebrates the creative potential and collaborative efforts of student artists and writers.
References


