This is the Weekly Reflection podcast from Saint Louis University’s Center for Transformative Teaching and Learning. Each week, we focus on a topic that fits with our theme for the 2012-2013 academic year, Engaging All Learners. Each reflection loosely follows the five-part Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm (context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation). The goal of this podcast is to provide an avenue into a space for thoughtful reflection on complex issues, rather than to provide answers to these issues.

Week 6: Authentic Projects for Authentic Learning

Context:
We often hear about the need for “authentic learning” in our university classrooms. Authentic learning is the idea that if students are learning about math, for instance, they should be learning to think like mathematicians, or if they are learning about history, they should be learning to think like historians. While we may or may not be teaching our students in these ways, and we may even be skeptical about teaching a non-major to think in these very particular ways, the idea is surely an intriguing one to most faculty. In order to begin the process of authentic learning, however, we must first design the authentic projects or tasks for students to undertake these processes of learning.

Experience:
If true learning is tied to authentic projects, it is important to identify what the characteristics of authentic projects are. According to scholars, Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe there are some primary attributes that all authentic learning tasks possess. Authentic learning happens as a process rather than as a result of discrete tasks; therefore, authentic projects create opportunities for students to practice, consult a variety of resources, receive different types of feedback, and then revise accordingly. These projects are realistically contextualized; thus, they ask students to use skills and knowledge in ways that replicate key challenges or circumstances a professional in the field would encounter. Relying on unstructured and complex problems, projects require judgment and innovation in order to challenge learners to figure out the nature of the problem as well as possible solutions while also assessing the students’ effective and efficient use of their range of knowledge and skills. Using authentic projects ensures that we are engaging students at a variety of levels in the learning process in a variety of ways.

Reflection:
(Take some time to consider the following prompts. You may find it helpful to write or sketch your thoughts.)

What types of skills and knowledge do students in your classes create over the duration of an academic term? In what ways do professionals in your field or discipline use those same sets of knowledge and skill in their professional lives? Do you currently ask students to complete projects that do not directly relate to a circumstance that would be experienced outside of the classroom? What is the purpose of those projects? Why do you include those projects?

Action:
Examine the learning objectives for one of your courses, and create a short list of knowledge and skills students should construct during the term. Using that set of knowledge and skills, create one authentic project, based on the characteristics discussed in the Experience section. Identify what steps students might need to take in order to move through the project from draft, through revision,
to final version. Be sure that the project directly connects to the skills and knowledge they will have created at that point in the term.

Evaluation:
(The following questions are meant to be used at a later time after you have completed the Action, but may be used as a way to shape the action as well. It may be helpful to write or sketch your responses.)

With what intentions did you redesign or create the learning experience? How did those intentions present in the learning experience? Did the experience change the ways you see teaching, learning or the course?

How do you know if the change made a difference in student learning? For which students did the change make the most difference? Are there negatives for any students associated with the change you made?

What will you do next?

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Thank you for participating in this week’s reflection.

The next reflection will be posted on Friday, October 12th. All reflections are archived for future use. For more information on this week’s topic, CTTL services, programs, or events please consult the website at http://slu.edu/cttl.