

Research Article Review

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Citation

Hernández-Ramos, P., & De La Paz, S. (2009). Learning History in Middle School by Designing Multimedia in a Project-Based Learning Experience. *Journal Of Research On Technology In Education*, 42(2), 151-173.

Summary

The authors conducted a study in two demographically-similar 8th grade U.S. history classrooms in Northern California. One classroom at the intervention school was provided with significant support in developing a unit based on the core principles of Project-Based Learning, a constructivist approach, with technology integration. At the other school, a “contrast” rather than “control” classroom employed traditional methods to teach the same content. Data sources included knowledge pre- and post-tests in both classrooms, multimedia projects in the intervention classroom, and an opinion survey of all participating students.

The article’s authors focus on three research questions:

1. Do eighth grade students who learn history through technology-assisted project-based learning experiences acquire more, the same, or less content knowledge than students in a comparison condition?
2. Is historical thinking evident in the multimedia mini-documentary projects created by students, as a result of a six-week collaborative unit on westward expansion?
3. Do eighth grade students who learn history through technology-assisted project-based learning experiences develop positive attitudes and beliefs about social studies and the study of history in particular?

Key Issues

Usefulness

An examination of the research questions shows the study's emphasis on discovering the potential of project-based learning, as opposed to proving the method's superiority over traditional teaching methods. Only the first question offers the opportunity for comparison between the two groups of students, while the other two tend more toward binary conditions in the intervention group. Therefore, the study can provide encouragement and direction for those interested in project-based learning, but it cannot be used as proof of the method's efficacy.

Reliability

In order to prove the benefits of project-based learning, the study would have to address an apparently overlooked variable, the effect of the authors on the intervention classroom. While both classes were taught by veteran teachers, the intervention classroom received a unit plan, daily visits, co-teaching, and technology support. These elements could engender significant improvements in any classroom, regardless of the methodology or instructional theory.

Final Evaluation

The article presents project-based learning as a positive improvement in an era of excessive objective testing and minimal critical thinking. Not only did students show historical thinking skills and positive attitudes toward history, they also performed well on the ubiquitous multiple choice exams. This combination of improvements could sway the opinions of those who make decisions regarding school curriculum to entertain more discussion of project-based learning, when those authorities may previously have avoided the topic due to misconceptions regarding data-driven, verifiable outcomes. As the public education sector continues to realize the damaging effects of relying only on multiple choice tests, we can hope that project-based

learning will be accepted in more public schools. Our nation could only benefit if more students were able to think critically and positively about history.

Level One**Level Two****Level three.***Level four.**Level five.*

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