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Practicing Authentic Assessment: Aspiring Social Studies Teachers Teach in Schools

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Connecting Theory to Practice

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69670/mje.3.2.8><https://mje.williamwoods.edu/>**Laura J. Dull
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For our social studies pedagogical methods classes, we developed a carefully scaffolded process that culminates with our preservice teachers teaching lessons in secondary school classrooms. As they teach in front of adolescents in real schools, preservice teachers engage in a truly “authentic” performance task. After explaining our theoretical framework and describing our partnership with schools developed over almost 20 years, we will draw from surveys to illustrate what happens when teacher candidates teach in actual classrooms and what makes their experiences authentic and meaningful.

Keywords

Adolescent Social Studies, Authentic Assessment, Practice Teaching, Teacher Education, Teacher Professionalism

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Introduction

In our pedagogical methods course for future middle and high school social studies teachers, our preservice teachers create units based on “backward design” planning (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). For these teaching units, they must develop “authentic assessments” (Sherrin, 2020; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Authentic assessments mirror activities that people do on the job or in their daily lives. In secondary social studies classrooms, this might mean creating a museum display like a historian or debating a bill like a legislator. To enable our preservice teachers to experience firsthand the process of teaching and implementing authentic assessment, we ask them to create a lesson that they will teach in a real middle or high school classroom. After explaining our theoretical framework and describing our partnership with schools developed over almost 20 years, we draw from surveys and other data to illustrate what happens when teacher candidates teach in actual classrooms—and what makes their experiences authentic and meaningful.

Theoretical Framework: Learning by Doing

In their influential book, *Understanding by Design* (2005), Wiggins and McTighe advocated for “backward design” to maximize learning. They argued that teachers should start unit planning by first identifying the understandings and knowledge that they want students to attain by the end of a unit. Next, teachers determine what forms of assessment will show that students have achieved understanding. The authors urged teachers to develop “authentic” projects and activities that get students to “do” the discipline, so that the assessment is more meaningful and effective. In the final phase of backward design, teachers develop learning experiences to facilitate understanding and prepare students to succeed on the assessment (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 18).

The idea of authentic assessment derives from progressive educational concepts of “learning by doing” associated with John Dewey (1997). Progressive educational reformers wanted teachers to discard “traditional” education like recitation and lecture in favor of “active,” “hands-on” learning or learning by doing, believed to be more relevant and practical for rural and urban workers (Kliebard, 1995, pp. 1-25). Recent research by King et al. (2009) found that “students who experienced higher levels of authentic instruction and assessment showed higher achievement than students who experienced lower levels of authentic instruction and assessment” (p. 47; see also Saye & SSIRC, 2013). However, as “reading wars” indicate, the debate about how children best learn continues (Coleman, 2025).

Like many education professors seeking to give students much-needed teaching practice, we initially implemented Practice-Based Teacher Education (PBTE) in our classes (Grossman et al., 2009). After discussing the components of good planning (decompositions of practice) and conducting model lessons with the students (representations of practice), we asked candidates to present a lesson from their units to their peers (approximations of practice) (Grossman et al., 2009). Done well, PBTE can be a good way to help prepare candidates for teaching (Hawthorne & Gruver, 2023; Young & Rouse, 2024).

Our students’ PBTE presentations gave them practice public speaking and giving and receiving feedback. However, these “approximations of practice” (Grossman et al., 2009) were not as motivating as tackling the “cognitively complex real world problem” of teaching actual adolescents (Fredricks, 2011, p. 332). Simply put, instructing peers within the safe walls of a college classroom lacked the challenge of teaching youth in a real classroom. Fortunately, we found secondary teachers, most of them graduates of our program, who opened their classes so that our candidates could undergo a truly authentic performance task.

Context of Our Study

We teach in a school of education at a small, comprehensive state college. One of us is a full-time, tenured professor, who taught for seven years in New York City public schools and has been at the college for over 20 years. The other authors are current and former public-school teachers and alumna of our adolescence social studies program. Prior to student teaching, our preservice teachers take a methods of teaching class, along with a 35-hour fieldwork component. To qualify for student teaching the next semester, methods students need to earn a B or better and must prove themselves capable of meeting the demands of teaching.

After careful lesson planning and rehearsals, with multiple opportunities for feedback and revision, our students take full charge of a classroom in either a middle or a high school, presenting their lesson to at least two different classes. Both of our partner schools offer a good introduction to teaching: classes are equipped with computers, smart boards, and other technology, students are generally motivated to learn, and administration, faculty, and staff are welcoming. At the schools, our preservice teachers work with socioeconomically, racially, ethnically diverse, and inclusion students, as well as second-language learners.

Depending on our methods class size (anywhere from 15 to 30 students), we work with two to three different teachers in the schools. Our preservice teachers teach in pairs to free up time for them to teach the same lesson at least twice during the school day. This enables student teachers to obtain feedback and then adjust in their next class, just as all good teachers do. For most of our candidates, this is their first time teaching a social studies lesson to a class full of adolescents.

Study Methods

Inspired by the notion that “good teaching is research” (Meyers & Rust, 2003, p. xvii), we approached this study as a systematic, “planned inquiry” into a fundamental learning activity in our classroom (Falk & Blumenreich, 2005, p. 2). For this study, we asked, in what ways did this activity fulfill the characteristics of an authentic assessment? According to participants, what are the strengths and limitations of implementing this authentic assessment? We used a qualitative, descriptive case study design to better understand what happened in this educational intervention (Picciano, 2004; Wellington, 2000).

To answer our questions, we focused on 43 surveys done by preservice teachers in three semesters, from Spring 2024 to Spring 2025. These surveys reflect responses to the most recent innovations to our partnership. In Spring 2025, we also obtained surveys from three cooperating teachers and 73 responses from school pupils. We draw from observation notes, students’ lesson plans, and other teaching materials to provide examples from our experiences.

For each group of respondents, open-ended survey questions asked them to describe highlights of the experience, explain key learning moments and give feedback and suggestions to improve the process. To analyze the data, we read through the surveys to derive patterns and themes among each group of stakeholders. We then re-read the materials, asking questions of the data as advised Emerson et al. (1995): What do the responses tell us about authentic assessment? What areas for improvement did they identify?

Implementation Model: Teaching in a Real School

Before the semester begins, we make sure we still have the support of the school principals. In the early part of the semester, the schoolteachers visit our class to outline their expectations and answer questions. Sometimes they run a demonstration lesson to illustrate the kinds of teaching activities our preservice teachers might do. The cooperating teachers prepare their own students by explaining how this partnership, and the pupils’ participation, helps train future teachers.

At both schools, students are accustomed to group work, discussion, and other forms of student-centered learning (Bower & Lobdell, 1999; Turk & Berman, 2025). Because of this, we ask our students to develop lessons that lead to active learning and critical thinking. The teachers inform us what topics they will be covering at the time of our visits, so that preservice teachers can create lessons related directly to the content or through a current event, like connecting Black Lives Matter to the civil rights movement. To bring out diverse opinions, the student teachers need to provide multiple viewpoints on an issue (Reisman, 2012). For example, one pair used conflicting articles about Prohibition for students to weigh the merits and problems of the policy.

Before writing their lessons, preservice teachers visit the school, if possible, during their field work time. They observe classes, discuss preliminary ideas with the teachers, and begin to outline their lessons. Once our students produce a first draft, the cooperating teachers and professor provide comments and students make revisions. Even after revisions, the lessons sometimes fell flat in school classrooms. In Spring 2024, we implemented an additional step in the process. Before going into the schools, students present the lessons to their peers. Running through the activities and getting feedback from classmates helped to further refine the lessons.

After weeks of planning and practice, we meet as a class at the schools, the students looking polished in professional attire. Professors and classroom teachers observe and take notes on the lessons. Preservice teachers who are not teaching observe their peers using feedback forms. We schedule breaks between each pairs' lessons so that they can discuss the lessons with the teachers and make changes for the next class. For example, when two student teachers had difficulty with classroom management, the teacher suggested several ways to keep the middle schoolers on task.

At the end of the school day, we debrief the lessons with cooperating teachers and peers. Feedback and reflections are more honest and specific than they were when teaching only in the college classroom. In addition, teaching theories come to life as we discuss classroom moments, such as the effective use of an essential question. Hearing diverse perspectives, preservice teachers realize that there are multiple ways to approach lesson planning—and that knowing your students is crucial to crafting lessons that acknowledge young peoples' experiences and “funds of knowledge” (Gonzalez et al., 2005). These experiences remind future teachers that teaching is not only about content delivery but about human connection, curiosity, and the courage to engage in the beautiful, messy work of learning with others.

Findings and Discussion

Authentic Assessment: Preservice Teachers

Through the process of creating, modifying, and presenting lessons multiple times, observing and teaching with peers, and working with teachers and youth, our preservice teachers obtain an invaluable immersion in the joys and challenges of teaching. Many left the schools thrilled that students had produced a creative poster or made a thoughtful comment. They pondered over what did or did not work and how their expectations had been altered when confronted with real students. In short, the experience was meaningful and authentic—exactly as predicted by Wiggins and McTighe (2005).

Applying Wiggins and McTighe's six characteristics of authentic tasks, we argue that school teaching puts learners in “real-world situations” that require “judgment and innovation” as they confront “key challenging situations” in the classroom. By “ask[ing] students to ‘do’ the subject,” we can assess their ability to “efficiently and effectively use a repertoire of knowledge and skills” to “navigate” complex classroom dynamics. This is crucial in helping us determine students' readiness for student teaching. Finally, we have built in many opportunities for our preservice teachers to “rehearse, practice, consult resources, and get feedback on and refine performances and products” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 154).

We analyzed the data to find themes related to Wiggins and McTighe's characteristics of authentic assessment. The most frequent theme preservice teachers wrote about was how the experience replicated "key challenging situations" that required "judgment and innovation" in the fluid secondary school environment (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 154). Seventy percent of the preservice teachers (30 of 43) described how they gained deeper awareness of challenges such as classroom management and student engagement. For example, one noted the "importance of giving clear instructions"; another wrote about how she had to stop herself from "giving away the answers" during questioning. Teaching real students reinforced theories we had discussed in class, as when a student wrote that her lesson "made me realize how important it is to teach multiple sides/stories of history."

Over a quarter of the students (12 of 43) wrote about how much they valued teachers' and peers' suggestions for improvement —no matter how hard that feedback was to hear. One spoke appreciatively about the teachers' "support, insight, critique and willingness to work with us"; another liked the "direct and respectful" feedback they got from students and teachers. A third student said she "really appreciated being told I looked stiff as it helped me adjust and be more sure of myself" in the later lesson. As Wiggins and McTighe (2005) note, "learning is maximized" when learners engage in "cycles of perform-feedback-revise-perform" that enable them to refine their practices (p. 154). Over a third of the students (16) wrote that they felt affirmed in their career choice and more confident about their ability to student-teach the following semester. As one student put it, teaching in a real classroom "completely reinforced my decision to be a teacher." In other words, by "doing" the subject, that is, "simulat[ing] the kind of work done by people in the field," preservice teachers were able to test out their chosen career (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 154).

In addition to these qualities of authentic assessment, we would add an additional aspect: challenges to stereotypes and misconceptions. Ten students discussed how their views of student motivation changed during teaching. As one student put it, "students know way more than we typically give them credit for." One coauthor (Scheffel) has come full circle, having taught in the middle school as a methods student and now hosting our students as a full-time teacher. She writes of her experience as a methods student, "I was terrified of student teaching and had a lot of misconceptions about teenagers. That [teaching] experience completely altered the way that I saw students and taught me that teaching was going to be an enjoyable experience."

Authentic Assessment: Pupils in the Schools

While this experience was authentic for our future teachers, it was a meaningful learning experience for the pupils and their teachers too. In scholarly materials, the focus of authentic assessment is often on the learner; but the participants in the experience are also learning. For example, describing what they liked or what was helpful about the student teachers' lessons, 90% of the school pupils (66 of 73) expressed positive reactions to the lessons, saying they enjoyed the "activities and groupwork," the use of "lots of strategies to help get students involved," and that their preservice teachers "were very funny and engaged with the class."

About half the pupils (38) recalled specific learning, as when one "realized most of our products are from Asia" in a lesson on fast fashion and another learned "what the Ho Chi Minh Trail was and where it led" in a Vietnam War activity. Conversely, about 13 students stated they "don't remember" or didn't learn anything. Sixty-seven of the pupils gave useful suggestions to our novice teachers: show "more confidence!!!", "don't just read the slides," and "speak up if we acted badly." Several noticed that the preservice teachers were "nervous" and "a little shy at first but they gradually opened up more...that helped them connect with the students." Coming from actual students, their thoughts and encouragements were particularly powerful to our future teachers.

Our coauthor (Scheffel) runs a discussion with her students after each visit. During these discussions, her students begin to have conversations about what works for them as students, what metacognition is, and

what kinds of teaching they gravitate most towards. This in turn helps their teacher understand some of their individual needs. Students also become curious about the teaching profession, asking questions about what it's like to be a teacher and if that is something they might do in the future.

Authentic Assessment: Cooperating Teachers

In a climate of high-stakes accountability, in which teachers are “de-professionalized” by predetermined curricula, scripted lessons, and standardized tests, our partnership provides an opportunity for the cooperating teachers to assert their autonomy (Bushnell, 2003). In commenting on the partnership, one cooperating teacher wrote, “it gives me a chance to brainstorm with enthusiastic students, which causes me to reflect on my own lessons.” Similarly, another teacher spoke about working to “shape the future of education by helping the methods students hone their craft.”

All three cooperating teachers spoke about how the experience affected their practice. One stated, “I have learned a lot from the methods students. They are often on the cutting edge of technological things which I have been able to learn about and even implement into my own lessons.” Because interpretations of history are “fluid” and “more of the past opens up to us” as new perspectives arise, our coauthor is excited to see “these changes enter the classroom” through the methods students’ “interpretations of content and how they conceptualize the teaching of that subject.” The third teacher concluded, working “with preservice teachers always reignites my passion and appreciation for this job. It reminds me of why I wanted to be a teacher in the first place.”

Limitations and Future Research

The biggest limitation of our project is time. Setting up and maintaining the partnership, preparing the students, and going into schools takes a lot of time beyond regular planning for the methods course. In addition, covering a vast state curriculum means that secondary school teachers do not have much class time to spare, so our preservice teachers teach in pairs. Ideally, students would teach lessons on their own. In addition, as the schools we work in are relatively well-resourced, we would love to extend our partnership into schools with more rural or urban populations.

In their surveys, preservice teachers mostly asked for more knowledge about the students they would be teaching, so that they could be better prepared. Though they were urged to go to the schools to meet the students ahead of time, many live at a great distance from the schools and were unable to make the trip (our college works with students and schools across several counties).

While our surveys yielded important information, interviews with participants and ethnographic research would bring out more depth about their experiences with this authentic assessment experience. Another future research path would be to follow the preservice teachers into their own classrooms to observe the ways in which they implement authentic assessment.

Implications for Practice and Conclusion

Teaching in schools, with the support, guidance, and critique of peers, adolescents, and working teachers, can be a powerful, authentic way to prepare future teachers. In the surveys, there was overwhelming agreement (37 of 43) that teaching in the schools was the highlight of the program: preservice teachers described it as “unforgettable” and the “best experience I’ve had yet.” Another wrote: “LOVE this! I wish we could’ve done more lessons.” Structured, authentic teaching practice in schools strengthens pre-service teachers’ ability to translate theory into practice, fosters the development of professional identity, and deepens partnerships between universities and local schools—an urgent need in today’s teacher preparation programs.

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