Four years ago, Peter Haun was teaching in a failing school.

Oak Park High, located in an inner-ring Detroit suburb, had scored in the bottom three percent of high schools in Michigan. The school district had a deficit. The state was threatening to bring in a financial manager to take over.

“It was kind of a double-whammy,” said Haun, a veteran English instructor. “We ended up on a very bad list.”

When teaching consultant Linda Denstaedt first came to Oak Park High, she saw teachers reading aloud to students, who rarely finished assignments at home. Students were coming into 11th-grade English with sixth-grade reading levels. And the district had limited resources to help them catch up.

But landing on the high-priority school list was the beginning of a shift for Oak Park High. The district won a $4.2 million federal grant that gave it an influx of technology and teaching resources.

Working with Denstaedt, Haun began to use an authentic literacy approach in his English classes, one that engaged students by asking them to think like writers, rather than listening to lectures on novels and copying notes for multiple-choice tests.

“I remember the first day that Peter introduced theory-making to his 11th graders,” Denstaedt said “They were thrilled by the idea that they could have their own idea of what a novel meant.” The students shouted out ideas as Denstaedt and Haun wrote answers on the board. “We had 20 different theories and 30 kids in the room. It was a little more than we were hoping for, to be honest,” she laughed. “But we loved it.”

Real Projects, Real Stakes

In the new book, Doing and Making Authentic Literacies, part of NCTE’s Principles in Practice series, Denstaedt and coauthors Laura Jane Roop and Stephen Best explore the idea of authentic disciplinary literacies, giving students real-world projects and stakes to help them become more engaged in their learning.

Denstaedt and Roop are directors of National Writing Project sites in Michigan and Pennsylvania, respectively. They are also both writers who brought their own writing practice into their English language arts classrooms.

But their collaborations across disciplines, with instructors in the sciences (including Best), math, and construction trades gave them new insights into how authentic projects could engage students both inside and outside the classroom.

Authentic learning efforts in the classroom are not new, Roop and Denstaedt admit. But they see momentum growing as the Maker movement takes off, and as projects like the Digital Youth Network allow students to solve real-world problems outside the classroom.

And some states, as they work to implement Common Core Standards, are including authentic literacy projects to deepen students’ understanding and ability to apply what they’re learning beyond the classroom.

“There are issues of equity at stake here, issues of accelerating students who are grade levels behind in reading and writing,” Denstaedt said. “[Laura and I] were both working in high-need, high-priority settings, seeing the things that happened to students when they’ve been given the opportunity to do more than bookwork and rote memorization.”

The Algebra Project

Roop saw many of the elements of authentic learning, including real-world problems, student choice, and authentic audiences, during the five years she followed students in Ypsilanti, Michigan, as they worked with the Algebra Project.
Continued from page 7

The district was not making adequate yearly progress and was in the bottom five percent nationally at a time when Michigan was ratcheting up its math standards.

The district was desperate and the students were “alienated and disenfranchised,” Roop said. These were “students for whom the system was not working in any way.”

The Algebra Project, founded by Civil Rights activist Bob Moses, introduces students as early as ninth grade to tools of investigation that allow them to think like mathematicians.

For example, students work on the “Road Coloring Problem,” a puzzle that took hundreds of mathematicians 30 years to solve. Students start with a worksheet that uses symbolic language such as arrows and circles, and then physically move around the classroom to show how they would build a city map that gets a group of people to arrive at the same place at the same time from any location.

In the process, they learn to ask questions like a mathematician, translating their everyday “people talk” to the symbol language used in math. They are solving a real problem, and the project allows students to make independent decisions to find an open-ended answer.

Moses, the founder, sought out authentic audiences, including college classrooms and national conferences, where the students could demonstrate their new understanding of math concepts.

“The year they were in 10th grade, they started the year all over the place,” Roop said. “We had a chance for them to speak in a class of college students.

“It was great,” she said. “It put them on the spot. They were seeing college students who were interested in what they had to say and interested in math. They were like, ‘Whoa, these students are for real.’”

One student was so inspired, he transferred from his Algebra Project class to college prep math.

The end result, she said, is that students who had been labeled at-risk or failing, came out of the program with a deep foundational understanding of the language of math and how it applied to their lives.

“Students got to the point where they were very confident when they would face problems or equations,” Roop said. “They would encounter mathematical concepts that I didn’t encounter until I was in college.”

**Picking up the Hammer**

Denstaedt said her thinking about authentic literacy began when she started taking writing classes and bringing what she had learned back into her classroom, treating her students like fellow writers.

She noticed that when she included units in which students wrote fiction, poetry, and memoir for publication, they began to read their assigned texts differently.

“They were reading Hemingway as a co-writer,” she said. She also saw a big jump in her students’ AP English scores.

“My students were passing at a really high rate, but when we started actually writing and thinking about the decisions of writing, their analysis and explication skills altered exponentially,” she said. “The pass rate increased, but also most of my students were scoring in the top end, 4s and 5s.”

After she retired from the classroom in 2002, she began working with a construction trades teacher, Dick Moscovic, at her former school district.

Moscovic had invited her to work with his classroom to help boost students’ reading and writing skills. “Most of our students were probably around third- or fourth-grade reading level,” he said.

While Denstaedt helped him design in-depth project notebooks and other assignments that asked them to...
break down and explain their work, she was learning her own lessons from the students in the class.

She helped students put up a wall, and failed at her first attempt. And she watched one student, in particular, who had been failing in regular classes become a leader on his construction crew, building houses for outside clients.

His work on an authentic project with real stakes helped him find something he was good at and led him to apply that discipline to his regular classes, so he could raise his grades and get into a college construction management program.

“I have this picture of learning that is a two-by-four with six nails in it,” she said. “The board looks like a mess,” but it is up to code. “Mistakes are huge,” she said. “We don’t let our kids make enough mistakes.”

The class also gave her language to help her think about authentic learning on a continuum, from classwork that she calls “doing school,” tasks where students are simply learning information to get a grade, to foundational learning, project-based learning, and finally authentic learning, where students work for an audience outside of school.

And she realized that even in a construction management program, that is “90 percent authentic work, there are things they do that are like school, that we call, ‘Doing the Disciplines.’”

Working the Room
Four years into his experiment with disciplinary learning, Peter Haun no longer spends all his time in front of his 11th-grade English class, giving lectures while students copy down notes. Instead, he models brief strategy lessons and his students work in small groups, annotating texts, practicing the strategies, and serving as peer mentors for each other’s writing.

While they’re working in groups, he works the room, listening in, giving students feedback, and correcting misunderstandings.

“It’s physically exhausting, because I’m running around the room every day, but in the long run it’s so much more beneficial for the students,” he said. “Before, when a kid sat in the back of the room, they might escape notice. Now, the expectation is, ‘Mr. Haun might check in on me.’”

Haun also tries the exercises with the students as a teacher-writer and shares his results to show the messiness of his own first drafts, “even though I’m not very comfortable with it.”

The shift is challenging for both students and teachers. (See an excerpt from the book on p. 9.)

“The lesson architecture changes dramatically,” Denstaedt said. “Students have to make independent decisions about what to do and how to do it. They have to talk to their partners to check their learning and self-monitor.” When she worked with Haun’s class, Denstaedt said she heard students complain, “Can’t you just give us a worksheet again? Because that was easier, I didn’t have to think so much. I could just copy from the person next to me.”

And for teachers, it’s a challenge to be constantly engaged in the work of the room, to “not sit back and grade or prep tomorrow’s lessons,” Denstaedt said.

“I’ve worked harder in the last four years than I’ve worked in my 14 years of teaching,” Haun said. The results, however, keep him motivated. “You can see huge growth in our students.”

Last year, Oak Park High moved off the high-priority school list.

Trisha Collopy is a Minneapolis writer.
Excerpt: *Doing and Making Authentic Literacies*

**The Authenticity Test**

A simple test can become the beginning of a journey toward engagement in authentic classroom work. Here’s a question we’ve used to revise our own practice that can sometimes be used to “test” our teaching plans: Is this practice or strategy something that an adult, experienced, literate person really does in the world outside of school? And if the practice or strategy passes this little test, here is a follow-up question: Do the students understand its authenticity? The questions call out two priorities: 1) it is used outside of school; 2) students understand how and why it is a literate habit of experienced adults. So let’s try out the authenticity test on several teacher assignments. (See figure below.)

While we aren’t saying that teachers should never develop or assign tasks that have no corollary in the world outside of school, we do believe that such school-based tasks should be considered as steps toward the development of authentic disciplinary skills, strategies, and literate habits; and that school-based tasks should be embedded in larger projects or initiatives that make authentic applicability and usefulness clear. By putting tasks and experiences to the authenticity test, teachers can begin to find aspects of schooling that are ripe for re-imagination.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Used Outside of School</th>
<th>How and Why Used by Experienced Adults</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prior to writing personal narratives, students write daily entries in a writer’s notebook so students capture and explore events, images, ideas, and stories that emerge in daily living.</td>
<td>Yes. Some committed writers do keep writing notebooks almost on a daily basis.</td>
<td>Video clips where YA authors talk about their notebooks; quoted passages where known writers explain how and why they use notebooks; articles by writers discussing the practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior to a study of biological cell function, create a K-W-L chart. Return to the chart throughout the study.</td>
<td>Sometimes. Some adults do follow the pattern of thinking represented by a K-W-L chart: What do I already know about this topic? What am I trying to learn? What did I learn? However, users outside of school may not make a chart and may have more questions than can be tracked by a chart, such as How will I proceed? How can I keep track of what I am learning?</td>
<td>Interviews or video clips of scientists explaining how the scientific process of inquiry and how they use the process to begin or extended research to deepen or generate new knowledge about an aspect of cell function.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>While studying a period of history, write answers to questions at the end of a chapter in a history textbook.</td>
<td>No. This activity is something done in school, in order to check the students’ comprehension of a text created only for people in school.</td>
<td></td>
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