

Authentic Learning: The Metaphor, The Vision



Play chords, not single notes.

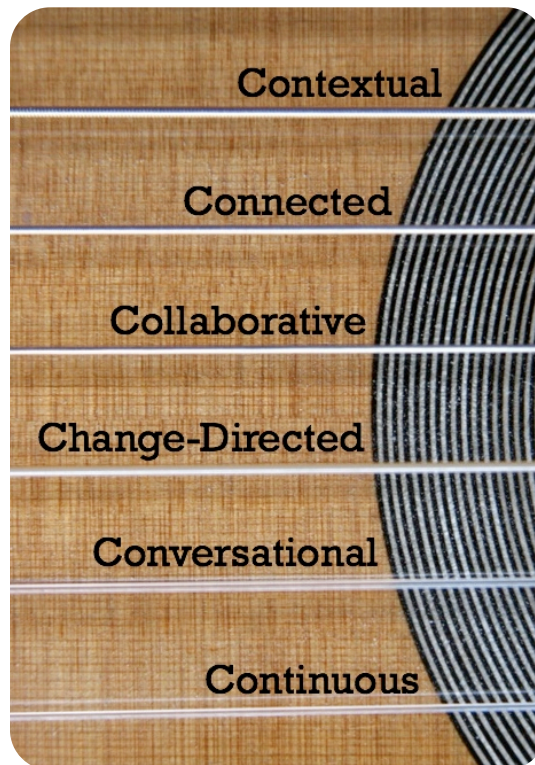
A string, no matter how out of tune, can play a note. It can resonate and reverberate for all that it's worth, but a single string can never play a chord. It can never join together with others to create complex music, moving and memorable.

Such strings are abundant in education. They are the singular solutions to complex problems that are so easy to hear. They appear original and hopeful because we want learning to be the natural product of stretching out our fingers towards one foundational standard. And yet, learning is complex, and reaching for it should not result in the atonal nightmare of plucking at the first things that our fingers run across. It is only through carefully planned finger placement and calculated strumming that Authentic Learning can be achieved.

So, what are the right strings to strum our educational fingers across? How should we tune our learning environments to make them Authentic?

An Authentic Learning Environment is the foundation for any modern classroom, both brick-and-mortar and online. It is the one place that asks students to take full ownership of their learning by coupling the technologies of creation with the pedagogy of critical thinking, constructivism, and inquiry.

The six strings of Authentic Learning do not ask students to use technology because it is somehow virtuous or out of fear of an increasing flat world. Rather, it is an integral part of the Environment because it is impossible to create immediate context, find elusive connections, collaborate fully, change direction adeptly, forge ongoing conversations, or learn continuously through any other medium.



The Six Strings: Explained

Each string must be fully understood if it is to be played with an expert's ear. These explanations will further define the Authentic Learning Environment that is vital for all students to experience.

Contextual (Relevant)

All information that is disseminated, and content that is uncovered has a greater context in the past, present, or future lives of the students.

In the Environment: Isolated concepts do not exist. The connectedness of learning is made obvious to all students, providing easier contextualization between disciplines and standards within a single discipline. The transfer of learning is an early expectation, meaning that, for example, students are accountable for bringing scientific inquiry into the cause and effect situations of history.



Connected (Hyperlinked)

All concepts are linked to others' ideas, whether they be original source documents, experts in the field, or student experts who already have an advanced understanding.

In the Environment: Each student has the power to look deeper into the texts being explored in class. They do not have to go far to search for greater meaning because all sources are not only cited; they are hyperlinked. Every resource created by students can be linked to at least one other resource that led to the student creation. The web that is created by teachers, students, and professionals working in the field is vital. It joins support to every decision made and work created, seamlessly.



Collaborative

Each assignment has the potential for working with others to brainstorm, create, refine, or revise.

In the Environment: Such endeavors as collaborative note taking allow students to join learning together and collect resources to aid all who are working together, whereas collaborative documents allow students to work asynchronously on projects and analyze data gathered in far-flung locations. All communications can be archived, so that no great idea is lost or overlooked because of a loud voice or a lack of time.



Change-Directed

All knowledge is constantly changing, and so are students' understanding and demonstration of knowledge.

In the Environment: Both teachers and students have the power to change curriculum and methods. Constant reflection and feedback guide instructional and learning decisions. By working together and receiving constant feedback from one another, teachers and students can truly differentiate for the greatest learning effect.



Conversational

Understanding is created through thoughtful discussion, conversation, and debate.

In the Environment: Making meaning of any text is a personal process that involves taking a concept or idea and relating it in terms that make sense to the individual. This process is visible in the form of backchannels during class and debates and discussions after class. Conversations help to make meaning, and so they are an integral part of an Authentic Learning Environment.



Continuous (Spontaneous)

Students can pursue all of their inspiration for learning. It does not have to wait until they get to the next class or until they get home because they have access to the technology and the freedom of the environment.

In the Environment: Students will have access to collaborative, aggregative, and investigative tools at all times. They will be able to use these tools whenever they request them, and they will be expected to request them a lot. They are responsible for taking ownership of their learning and continual and successive lines of inquiry are the basis for this ownership.