Differentiated Projects and Products in EL Education Schools

How do projects in the EL model differ from the typical classroom projects, book projects and science projects that are common in schools?

In the EL Education model, projects are not activities done after core academic work is completed, or just used for enrichment. Projects are long-term structures for learning academic content and skills, which require students to immediately put to use new content and skills in order to create something of value for an audience beyond the classroom. They may be worked on at home, but in general the classroom is the project workshop, and the projects are tied closely to the curriculum. There are clear, common standards for quality of content and presentation.

What is the difference between a Project and a Product?

EL Education distinguishes between a student project—the full spectrum of learning experiences, lessons, skills, understandings, disciplinary content and assessments in which students are engaged in order to create a product—and the product itself, the artifact that emerges from that process.

For example, one EL Education student product was a set of small, school-published books documenting the experiences of local senior citizens during the Great Depression. Each book contained a profile of a senior citizen, written by an individual student in memoir style, along with a watercolor portrait. A color copy of the book was kept by the student, while the original book was presented to the senior citizen and her family as a gift.

The full project surrounding that product was much larger, and included:

- class lessons and student research on the Great Depression
- analysis of visual arts, poetry, music and film from the Depression
- student-drafted timelines with national and personal family benchmarks
- book groups centered on fictional novels concerning the Depression
- a written essay connected to the book group novel
- fieldwork research at a local history museum
- two whole-class interviews with a local historian
- lessons and role-play practice in interviewing skills
- fieldwork visits to a local senior center for interviews
- writing lessons and practice in biography and memoir genres
- artistic lessons in portraiture and watercolor as a medium
- critique and revision of multiple drafts of the final written profile and portrait
- cooperative work in editing and binding the actual books

Additionally, the project entailed building a personal relationship with a senior citizen, which was for some students the most meaningful and transformational learning experience of the project.
How much choice should there be in Projects and Products?

Some schools and teachers assume that a differentiated project-based learning culture requires wide choice in the formats and topics of student projects, so that students have the broadest range of choice regarding what they will study and how they will demonstrate understanding and skills. While this approach can be effective under masterful leadership, EL does not generally recommend it.

Project content choice
EL feels it is essential that the projects focus on content and skills required by major state standards and local curricular maps, so that classroom time spent on project work is addressing what is essential. Therefore, teachers generally choose the content topic, sometimes in concert with students. There is room for controlled choice of segments of this basic content by individual students. But, in general, the whole class is collaboratively engaged in a project connected to the core curriculum. Because all students are working on a project with a foundation of common disciplinary content, the power of the group is engaged in the process of social construction of understanding. The group management of a common project also teaches citizenship, collaboration and teamwork skills, and enriches the classroom community. The common disciplinary content allows the teacher to gather text resources across a wide range of reading levels, which is a daunting task to differentiate if each student has an entirely different topic.

Product format choice
While some interpretations of a multiple intelligence-oriented approach would suggest that students should have a full range of product formats to express their understanding (e.g., a report, a play, a song, a dance, a painting, a video, a novel), this type of range presents many problems. First, it is extraordinarily difficult for a teacher to support students to do all these things well simultaneously. Each requires specific skills and expert critique. Classrooms that allow this range of formats at the same time generally elicit a lot of poor-quality products and performances, which can send a message to children that they should value expression, but not excellence. Second, encouraging different formats prevents the teacher from leading the class together in learning new skills in a particular medium through group lessons, exploration, practice and critique, which build class capacity, engagement and spirit. Third, it is vital that the project format focus on skills that are important to the curriculum; otherwise, project work will inevitably be marginalized in the school day.

Differentiating to Support Quality

The artifacts that emerged from the Great Depression Memoir Project described above—the books themselves—are beautiful pieces of work. They represent high-quality work from every student; and every senior citizen is honored with a moving tribute. A guest to the school, viewing copies of these books, might assume that the overall high quality was due to a strong teacher hand in touching-up and improving the student work, or that all the students engaged in the project were strong across a wide range of academic and artistic skills. Neither assumption would be true. The students varied greatly in background, skills and confidence, and the work was indeed their own. The quality of the books was due to a classroom culture of high standards, with explicit structures to shepherd work toward quality (e.g., clear learning targets, exemplary models, critique sessions, multiple drafts). It was also due to well-planned differentiated instruction. Importantly, that differentiation took place throughout the entire project (what Tomlinson calls the “process”), not simply in the production of the final product. Differentiation cannot wait until the last step of the project—the creation of the product—it must be built into the project structure from the beginning.
Differentiation in the Project
In project design, differentiated instruction entails previewing the wide set of skills and dispositions involved in the full project, and building in support structures, controlled choice and flexibility throughout the work. The teacher must assume that different aspects of the project will present challenges for different students and often then uses deliberate pre-assessment to match the planned work to students’ needs. Returning to the example of the Great Depression Memoir Project, it is easy to predict a range of challenges. For some students, understanding the economic and social issues of the Great Depression will be challenging conceptually. For others, challenges may be: reading, writing or research skills involved in the project; artistic skills of portraiture and control of the watercolor medium; personal courage and social skills required for the interviews; organizational skills in tracking and refining work through multiple drafts; the ability to focus during lessons, field research and interviews; the ability to work collaboratively with classmates in research and book production.

Much of the work of embedding effective differentiated structures into the project design must be done ahead of time. A variety of resources must be gathered and thoughtful, tiered structures must be planned. If the differentiated structures are done entirely ad-hoc, and created to meet problems as they appear, the project cannot be framed to support all students to be confident, clear and successful from the beginning. The effective use of those differentiated structures and resources is dependent on the teacher’s close understanding of the individual students and on her relationships with those students. In this project example, knowing students well allows the teacher to make informed decisions regarding key aspects of the project, including: which students to pair for research or interviews, and to cluster in effective research groups; which examples of written text to counsel individual students to use; how to arrange seating and make accommodations for note-taking during lessons; which students may need what types of support when leaving the school building for research or interviews; which students may need particular organizational, academic and artistic support for the work; and how much latitude should be given to different students within the project when they reach points of feeling overwhelmed. In secondary classrooms, where teachers often struggle to know larger groups of students as well as they need to in order to differentiate appropriately, pre-assessment and informed decision-making by the students themselves help the teacher plan for student differences.

Differentiation in the Product
A common product format does not mean that final products are identical. Whether students are writing historical novels based in the same time period, or drafting blueprints for a civic building proposal, or designing experiments to determine the efficacy of cleaning products, the skills and content required for these products is common, but the resulting products may be quite different. One of the most important qualities of a well-chosen product is that it compels students to learn common skills and content together, but allows them to be creative and individual within the common format. A useful strategy in project design is to include both mandatory and optional components. For a project on artists from the Harlem Renaissance, for example, each student may be required to complete mandatory pieces that receive deep classroom support (e.g., a timeline, biographical sketch, essay on influences and impact) and at least one optional piece that is less deeply supported (e.g., portrait, map, artistic review, family tree, art done in the style of the artist, copy of an artifact from the artist’s life). The combination of mandatory and optional components allows for student choice, and for differentiation of pace of work and time for teacher support of struggling students. Some students may add a single optional component to their product, while others may have time to add many optional components.
A detailed example: The Great Depression Memoir Project

Following are some general features of a well-designed project that embeds structures of differentiation, along with a brief explanation of how those features might look.

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<th>Features of a Project Supported Through Differentiation</th>
<th>How that Feature Looks in this Project Example</th>
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<td>A content topic that aligns closely with required disciplinary skills and knowledge. This allows the teacher to spend substantial time gathering differentiated resources and to dedicate substantial class time to the work.</td>
<td>In order to write a powerful, accurate personal memoir, students were compelled to learn 20th century history and use strong descriptive and analytical writing skills, all of which were important curricular requirements.</td>
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<td>Content learning is supported by a variety of resources—reading material across a broad range of sophistication; fieldwork research beyond the school; outside experts; multiple formats of information. This allows students to access knowledge through a variety of entry points (e.g., written text, museum exhibits, visual images and artwork, music, live interviews, photographs, diagrams, film), at different levels of difficulty.</td>
<td>In addition to reading materials and website archives across a range of reading levels, including fiction resources, students also gathered information from personal interviews, museum research, outside experts, and were exposed to visual art, music, poetry and film from the Depression era. For the Depression era novel, students chose among three options in self-selected book groups.</td>
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<td>An audience for the project beyond the classroom. This allows every student to feel an important mission to complete the work, and allows the teacher to act as a coach, pushing students toward quality for an authentic purpose.</td>
<td>Students had a powerful reason to learn their history and writing skills and to care about quality work: the senior citizens and their families were anxiously awaiting the gift of the book that celebrated their life stories. Personal relationships with the seniors made this project an emotionally charged mission.</td>
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<td>A project structure that combines group lessons, work and critique with clear individual responsibilities for each student. This allows every student to feel valued and accountable for his or her part, and to support each other in a common task. It allows the teacher to work with the whole group on key content and skills, and also to support and assess the work of each student individually.</td>
<td>Although each student had a peer assisting them during the interview with their senior citizen, each was responsible for creating a book on their person. Each student was responsible to the class and to their senior citizen partner. The teacher could support and assess each student individually, in addition to supporting them during group lessons and critiques.</td>
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<td>A project that gives authentic responsibility to students and encourages student initiative and leadership. This allows students to “own” the project, to work as adults do in the real world: managing tasks and time individually and as teams, learning from each other, adapting to each other’s learning styles.</td>
<td>Students were trusted to take responsibility in building a real relationship with their senior partner, bringing in artifacts from their own life, reaching out personally. They were trusted to support each other in interviews, writing, painting, and book production. They helped to plan and oversee the schedule for the project, including planning and managing the gift ceremony.</td>
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<td>A project structure that has separate components, often using different skills and intelligences, and perhaps including both mandatory and optional components. This allows students to express their understanding and talents in different media, and to complete small parts of the project one at a time. It allows the teacher to require the basics of all, and provide challenge components to some.</td>
<td>This project had a variety of components that students had to produce. These components required a wide range of skills and intelligences: timelines, written essays on novels, interview journals, written memoirs with four distinct sections, and watercolor portraits. Different students were able to showcase personal strengths at different points in the work.</td>
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<td>A project structure that supports all students to produce quality work, through: clear learning targets (goals/expectations for the work); models of strong work and group analysis of the features of strong work; multiple drafts and revision of the work; and critique structures to support students through revision. This allows all students to understand the level of quality that is expected, and gives students the time and feedback to improve the work in process.</td>
<td>Students were able to examine and discuss quality books created by students in other schools, to get a vision of what they were aiming for in terms of a quality product. They examined and discuss written memoirs to get a clear sense of quality writing in that genre, and did the same with watercolor portraits. All work went through multiple drafts and revisions, with critique and support from peers and teachers in the revision process.</td>
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