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3 Tips for Making Passion-Based Learning Work Successfully

Teaching & Learning with Technology

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Passion-based learning, a form of self-directed learning in which students pursue projects of interest to them, is becoming more popular in schools — and for good reason: Educators who have set aside time for passion-based learning have discovered that students become highly engaged and motivated when learning about topics that intrigue them, while taking their learning much deeper than they would in a traditional lesson.

Passion-based learning initiatives include [Genius Hour](#) and [20time](#), both inspired by Google’s program that lets employees spend 20% of their time on projects of their choosing to spark innovation.

When led effectively, passion-based learning can unleash students’ creativity and help them learn critical 21st century skills, while also assuming agency over their own learning. However, passion-based learning can be challenging to implement. To make it work, educators need the support of administration — and they need to be willing to take risks.

To make the transition easier, here are three tips from educators who have seen great success from this approach in their own classrooms.

Provide structure

“Consider a roadmap for the process,” said [Andi McNair](#), who was a classroom teacher for 16 years before becoming a digital innovation specialist for Education Service Center 12 in Texas.

McNair began implementing Genius Hour when she taught gifted and talented education for K–5 students about five years ago. “I felt like what I was teaching wasn’t meaningful to my students,” she said, confessing that she almost quit teaching before discovering the benefits of passion-based learning.

Although passion-based learning allows students to follow their interests, it shouldn’t be a free-for-all. Don’t just turn students loose without giving them some structure to follow, McNair advised.

In her own classroom, she devised a process that she calls the “[six Ps](#)” to implementing Genius Hour effectively: passion, pitch, plan, project, product and presentation. Students would think of a topic they were passionate about learning, pitch their idea for McNair’s approval, plan and develop their project, create a product that could be shared with the world and present their product to the class.

Implementing Genius Hour time helped her students see how learning applied beyond the four walls of the classroom, McNair said, adding: “Having a roadmap helped my learners avoid being overwhelmed and helped them stay on task.”

Learn alongside your students

[Laura Randazzo](#) started using 20Time in spring 2015 with her freshmen at Amador Valley High School in Pleasanton, CA. Before leaving the classroom last year to become a library assistant at Belmont University in Nashville, she devoted 20 percent of her class time to students' passion projects for 12 weeks every spring.

“20Time was revolutionary in terms of making language arts skills relevant to my students' lives,” she said. “My top advice is that the teacher should complete a passion project alongside her students. Modeling is important for students — and it was vital for me to ‘walk the talk’ of being a lifelong learner with them.”

Over the years, Randazzo's students have created a lacrosse blog and YouTube channel showing different stick moves, created a solar-powered phone charger, collected used eyeglasses to send to a hospital in India and even choreographed a ballet. For her part, Randazzo has learned to play the ukulele and performed with students at a full school assembly, strength-trained to be able to complete a

“I used our 20Time class sessions to check on students' progress and help them over speed bumps, so all of my own projects had to be completed outside of class time,” she said. “Still, I felt a great empathy with my students' struggles, and my students enjoyed hearing about my progress, frustrations, setbacks and wins.”

She adds: “Student buy-in on this project was always huge, and I think it's because we were all in the struggle together.”

Scale it school-wide

At Sonora Elementary School in Springdale, Arkansas, Principal Regina Stewman believes all students should have time for passion-based learning.

“One of our goals is to make sure each student has choice and voice in their learning, allowing them to follow their passion and be an innovator,” she said. “Enrichment shouldn't be limited to gifted students only. Every student deserves the opportunity to pursue their passion — and when they do, their learning goes through the roof.”

Giving all students the option to explore their interests can be challenging on a large scale. To overcome this hurdle and make the process easier for teachers, Sonora Elementary uses a new peer-to-peer learning platform called [Tract](#), which is a collection of video content organized into self-directed learning paths.

Students can browse for content that aligns with their interests, arranged by topics such as Arts, Nature, Gaming, Food, Sports, Music, World Culture, Technology and Business. They can learn how to take nature photos, master the art of juggling, learn how to become a music producer and more. Students can also upload their own video content to help teach others about their passions.

Every learning path includes an extension activity, and when students complete and upload their activity or challenge, the platform provides authentic feedback. What's more, each completed challenge earns coins which students can trade, redeem or donate to social causes.

Sonora Elementary students have engaged with passion-based learning in ways that Stewman has rarely seen in her 30-year teaching career. "It's students teaching students at a level of depth that is much more than simply watching a video," she observed.

Igniting a love for learning

When done well, passion-based learning can ignite a love for learning that spills over into core subject areas, these three educators have found.

"In all subjects, students want to be challenged while also finding relevancy between the materials being taught and their own lives," Randazzo said. "What every student wants is to be inspired, to learn and to have some fun while at school."