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Using Genius Hour to Change What We Do with What We Know

The author asks, “Where can we, as English language arts teachers, create room in our classrooms for curiosity—for students and for ourselves?” She outlines ways to use Genius Hour to help create an equitable, level classroom with access and ownership for all.

We have a real teacher shortage in the United States, and unless we change what we do with what we know, this problem will only get worse. A report by the Learning Policy Institute (Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond) indicates 90 percent of open teaching positions are because teachers are leaving the profession. This exodus is due to a variety of reasons, including a lack of administrative support, a lack of higher wages, and a lack of advancement opportunities, as well as an abundance of standardized testing pressures, complex accountability issues, and challenging working conditions (Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond). Many English language arts teachers see themselves in these struggles, and they may be wondering, What can I do to keep from becoming a statistic?

What We Know

As I read Terry Heick’s “Equity in Education: Where to Begin?” I could not stop thinking about his assertion that “equity never stops affecting.” Ever the English teacher, I consulted Merriam Webster’s Dictionary, which defines equity as “the quality of being fair and impartial.” How is it fair to keep asking teachers to do more with less? How is it fair to ask teachers to work longer and longer hours, to keep answering to more mandates, to sacrifice what they know is good for students in exchange for appeasing some outside force? Surely such ongoing compromises will never stop affecting students and communities.

In recent months, I have been engaging in conversations with early career teachers, those in their first three years in the classroom, on social media. Their experiences support the findings of the Learning Policy Institute. Emma reported that not only is her workload untenable, but instead of being seen as a hero, she is often seen as “the bad guy.” She experiences a lack of both administrative and parental support. Jackie is overwhelmed by data analysis, especially writing out what pre- and post-test scores mean and outlining what she plans to do to help students improve their skills. She is struggling with complex accountability issues. Susan described how she is not seen as a person anymore; she is a target for “unyielding criticism.” She grapples with the working conditions. Finally, one teacher sent me a private message, feeling overwhelmed in her context, asking, “Can I resign [in October]—or does that look bad?”

These are all realities of the classroom for these teachers. With so many teachers thinking of
leaving the classroom, we, as a profession and as a society, clearly need to be doing more—or we need to be doing something differently. *Merriam Webster’s Dictionary* defines *access* as “a way or means of entering or approaching.” Heick defines access as “a level, shared area with open pathways that are equidistant to mutually agreed-upon currencies.” We need to find a way to help teachers survive and thrive in a shared school community that may or may not be level. What early career teachers are telling me is they do not experience any “mutually agreed-upon currencies” (Heick). They expected currencies like collaboration and support; instead they are finding isolation and othering. Many veteran teachers feel the same way. This is undoubtedly a contributing factor for teacher turnover.

Desiree Carver-Thomas and Linda Darling-Hammond conclude, “To stem teacher turnover, federal, state, and district policymakers should consider improving the key factors associated with turnover: compensation, teacher preparation and support, and teaching conditions.” As teachers, we might not be able to have a significant impact on compensation. However, we can attend to issues of teacher preparation and support, thereby improving working conditions. Heick summarizes, “The work before us, then, may not be to level an academic playing field for which there is no even, but rather to create new terms for why we learn, how, and where—and then change the expectation for what we do with what we know.” As teachers, we need to be ready to change what we do with what we know.

**Change Starts with Passion**

The students in my teaching methods courses know I am on a mission to help prepare them to fight back against teacher burnout. They know I am a statistic: I am a former seventh- and eighth-grade English language arts teacher who burned out after four years. Like many classroom teachers, I arrived at school at 7:00 a.m. I taught six classes a day. I coached volleyball, spelling, and drama. I rarely left school before 9:00 p.m. My friends stopped calling. Because of my experience, I tell my students, “In order to be an interesting teacher, you need to be an interesting person.” Since I was always at school, I was losing myself. I was ceasing to be an interesting person. When I reflected further, I realized I left teaching middle school because I had lost my passion. There was nothing left in the job for me, and there was nothing of me left in the job.

As I work with classroom teachers who are facing similar questions of passion, I was fortunate to come across the work of A. J. Juliani, namely his book *Inquiry and Innovation in the Classroom: Using 20% Time, Genius Hour, and PBL to Drive Student Success*. In the introduction to this life-changing work, Juliani argues the importance of passion and autonomy: “When students are able to be curious, and explore their interests and passions, innovative work happens” (xvii). This made me ask: Where can we, as English language arts teachers, create room in our classrooms for curiosity—for students and for ourselves? Where do we have the opportunity to explore and to incorporate our students’ and our own passions? What is left in the classroom for each of us—and of each of us?

**Genius Hour: Why, How, and Where We Learn**

Juliani helped me understand how and why Google has become the gold standard on fostering passion and innovation. Google uses the concept of 20 percent time. Katherine von Jan shares, “Google’s 20% Time . . . is a philosophy and policy that every Google employee spend 20% of their time (the equivalent of a full work day each week) working on ideas and projects that interest that employee.” She explains how Google encourages employees “to explore anything other than their normal day-to-day job. As a result 50% of all Google’s products by 2009 originated from the 20% free time, including Gmail.” Juliani has taken this concept and adapted it for the classroom, calling it Genius Hour. Genius Hour is time set aside in class for students—and, as an extension, teachers—to follow their own questions and curiosities. We want students to be lifelong learners, and we need to be as well. In Juliani’s work, people learn because they are engaged with what interests them (why). They are designing their own problem-based learning projects (how).
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They are learning both in and beyond the classroom (where). Juliani discusses a student who wanted to learn sign language because a deaf relative was coming to live with her family (why). She designed her project around learning to sing a song using sign language (how), which she shared with her family and her peers at a school assembly (where). She used her Genius Hour to follow her passion, and it led to a deeply meaningful learning experience.

Juliani wants his students to be people who love learning. As teachers, we want to be people who love learning, too. To combat teacher burnout, we need to find that intrinsic meaning, to know why we are doing what we are doing. To this end, we need to incorporate our own passions, our own curiosities, into our teaching and into our students’ learning. This is one way we can help build equity for students and for ourselves.

Using Genius Hour to Develop Agency

The reason I sought out Genius Hour was because I wanted to help create what Heick describes as “a level, shared area with open pathways that are equidistant to mutually agreed-upon currencies.” I wanted students to learn how to carve out and defend some “mutually agreed-upon currencies,” such as agency, and I needed to learn it for myself. Madhu Narayanan asserts, “At its core is the idea that to further a just society, educators must acknowledge and confront existing power differentials while working to create an environment where student agency is developed and oppressive systems are challenged” (46; Cochran-Smith; Hackman). Our students are undeniably confronting power differentials and oppressive systems, and so are many of us. One teacher with whom I spoke described how her school is actively banning books, books she would love to teach. Another shared how his school is using mandated standards-based grading, though no one is exactly certain how that works, which is fair to neither the teachers nor the students. These colleagues are working in unjust environments, and they need agency to survive and to thrive in their respective contexts. Teachers and students alike are suffering because of these power differentials.

As I read Juliani’s work, I started to revise my teaching. I decided that developing agency needed to begin on day one of the school year. In one of my courses, we started the first class with a two-part activity. For Complete the Clock I, I gave each student a diagram of a clock face, without the details. They had ten seconds to complete the clock. When time was up, I asked, “What did you do with your drawing?” Given the short amount of time allotted, most students kept their thinking inside the box, finishing the clock face. They did what they thought I wanted.

After students had an opportunity to share, we did the same activity again. For Complete the Clock II, I gave each student the same diagram of a clock face, but this time I gave them ten minutes to complete the clock. When the time was up, I invited students to share their work. This time, the drawings were much more elaborate and detailed. Students had drawn whole scenes, from a plate of spaghetti to a rainbow with animals. I asked them what made the difference between their two drawings. They responded that having more time allowed them to be free to see the diagram in a different way. Ultimately, more time allowed them an opportunity to find their own access point into the drawing. They felt they had more agency to do what they wanted. After this discussion, we watched the YouTube video that inspired this activity, “Creativity Requires Time” (www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPbjSnZnWP0), which shows how and why to use this activity with K–12 students.

During the second week of class, we watched another YouTube video, “What Is Genius Hour?,” which is geared toward K–12 classrooms seeking to do more project-based learning stemming from students’ passions and curiosities (www.youtube.com/watch?v=NMFQUtHsWhc&feature=youtube). This video encourages students to (1) develop a driving question that (2) involves research and that (3) must be shared. For my course, I explained we would be having Genius Hour, or 20 percent time, every week, during class time, as a way for students to connect their passion to their learning. Genius Hour would be time for innovation and collaboration—a time to develop agency...
Juliani provides an effective framework for using Genius Hour. One of the strategies he suggests for helping students find their passion spoke to me. I am a huge college-basketball fan, and this presented me with an opportunity to incorporate one of my passions into my teaching. Similar to a NCAA tournament bracket, I invited students to complete a passion bracket. We started it in class, with students writing down as many of their interests as they could, pitting one pastime against the other due to the nature of the bracket. To help students think about what constitutes a passion, we used Juliani’s “6 Simple Strategies to Help Find Your Passion” (ajuliani.com/6-simple-strategies-to-help-find-your-passion/). I loved watching, and participating in, how much thought students put into these steps:

1. What do you do when no one is “telling you what to do”?
2. What do you do when you are “supposed to be doing something else”?
3. What types of information do you read and watch?
4. Create your own “March Madness” passion bracket.
5. Give yourself a trial period.
6. Get started.

The students completed their brackets at home. The following week, during our designated Genius Hour time, I asked students to take out their brackets. I wondered, “Which of your passions made it to the Final Four?” Again, I did this activity with the students, to model how, even when you have been teaching for more than 25 years, it is important to check in to make sure you are keeping your passion in your teaching. My hope was that this would help push back against the catalyst behind the early career teacher who reflected, “I am not recognized as a person anymore.” Undoubtedly students can feel this way as well. Students shared their passions, including creative writing, nature, music, cooking, and travel. I shared how these last two made my Final Four, too. This was promising. I could see ways students could incorporate their passions into their learning. Now—how could I get them to see their passions as a way to access a just classroom?

Purpose and Equity: Applying Agency to Individual Learning

The passion bracket activity afforded us a space to discuss purpose. Purpose drives the beginning research and the final product of the types of problem-based learning that stem from Genius Hour. In our class, we used our passion bracket activity as a transition into a semester-long, student-designed project.

Our work with the passion bracket laid the foundation for the next step: a project pitch, which was a three-slide PowerPoint presentation where each student proposed a course project. For the slides, each student outlined a motivation, timeline/resources, and goals for the student’s student-designed learning project. In terms of motivation, students described which passion(s) they were striving to include in their project. For timeline, they answered: Do you need checkpoints along the way? What kind of resources will you need? Finally, for goals, students reflected on: What are one to two goals you have for your project? What kind of risk(s) are you willing to take?

I did a project pitch as well, and I presented it to the class just like they did. At the time, I was preparing to teach a new course I had designed myself on teenagers as cultural artifacts. I used my Genius Hour as a time to plan this course. For my motivation, I was striving to combine my passion for travel and teaching. I had just returned from presenting at a conference on the cultural landscape of teenagers in Le Mans, France, and I was eager to apply what I had learned from educators around the world. In terms of a timeline, I outlined weekly checkpoints for which I was going to hold myself accountable. Students could hold me accountable by checking my work as well; I posted my project pitch to our course website along with everyone else’s (educ463fall2016.weebly.com/yearlong-plans.html). For resources, I discussed conference notes, Web resources, and textual possibilities, including books and films. I outlined two goals: (1) to stay focused on ways to examine how teenagers are a social construction that reflect—and perhaps refract—a society’s values, beliefs, and
capabilities; and (2) to actively weave in international resources related to texts, films, music, and social media. The more I worked on my passion project, which was work I needed to complete as part of my job anyway, the more excited I got about teaching a new course.

For the rest of the semester, we engaged in weekly Genius Hour work. Every Monday, students had a minimum of 20 minutes of in-class work time to collaborate with peers, to conference with me, and/or to work alone. They could stay in the classroom or go for a walk. We held each other accountable for our motivations, our timelines, and our goals. Periodically as we worked, I asked students to point to specific places in their projects where they were incorporating their passion(s). It was too easy to fall into patterns, to give up agency, to fall back into tried and true genres and approaches, to forget to create a space to access a mutually agreed-on currency. Our goal was purposeful, equitable, passion-based work.

Imagining a Just Future: Changing What We Do with What We Know

To date, I have incorporated Genius Hour for two different groups of students. I would like to report that Genius Hour has made all the difference. However, from my recent conversations with those students, now early career teachers, we still have just as many educators leaving the profession. In promising news, the ones who are staying are finding ways to incorporate their passions into the curriculum, from studying film as literature to teaching a favorite text. They are trying to find a way to have some agency with regard to the why, how, and where in their teaching and learning.

I am in the process of changing what I do with what I know. I believe Genius Hour has the power to help address issues of teacher preparation and support, thereby improving working conditions. In my classroom, I can use Genius Hour as a way to develop a support network between students and me, a way for us to give each other access to our thinking and our work. By incorporating students’ passions alongside my own, I can improve our working conditions by creating a space in the classroom for each of us—and of each of us.

When I ask, “Where can we, as English language arts teachers, create room in our classrooms for curiosity? Where do students have the opportunity to explore and to incorporate their own passions? What is left in the classroom for them—and of them?,” I understand that I want and need student voices so we can keep working together toward creating a just future in the English language arts classroom. This is why I love teaching. Working together to solve problems is where my true passion lies.

Works Cited


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ReadWriteThink Connection

Genius Hour allows students to choose and guide their own learning. In this strategy guide, see how one lesson uses tiered texts and multiple modalities to meet the learning style needs of students. This knowledge can then help the students guide themselves. http://bit.ly/fnPAPm